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Sanctity: or There's No Such Thing As A Naked Sailor • Dennis Selby

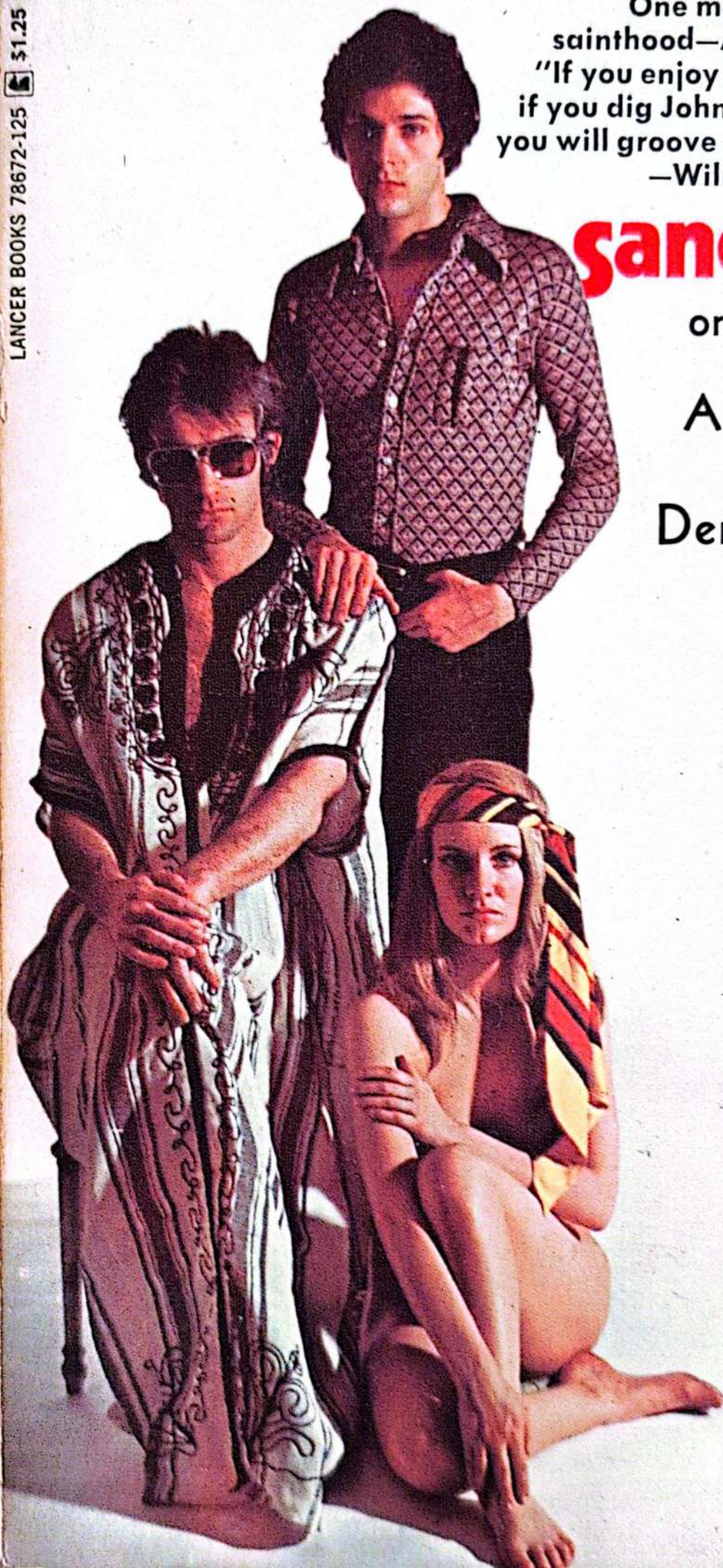
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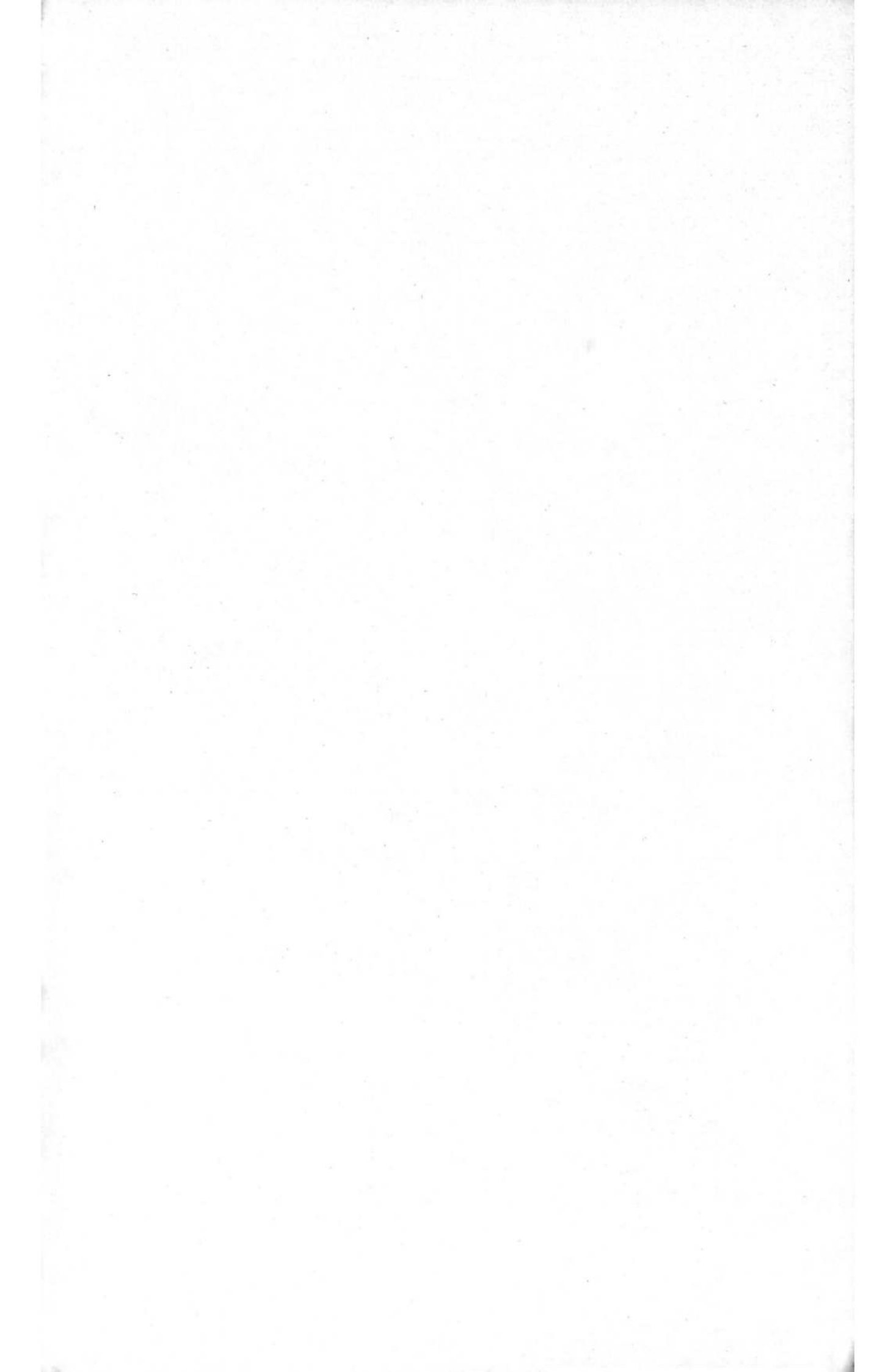
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NEW YORK



A LANCER BOOK

SANCTITY: or There's No Such Thing As A Naked Sailor

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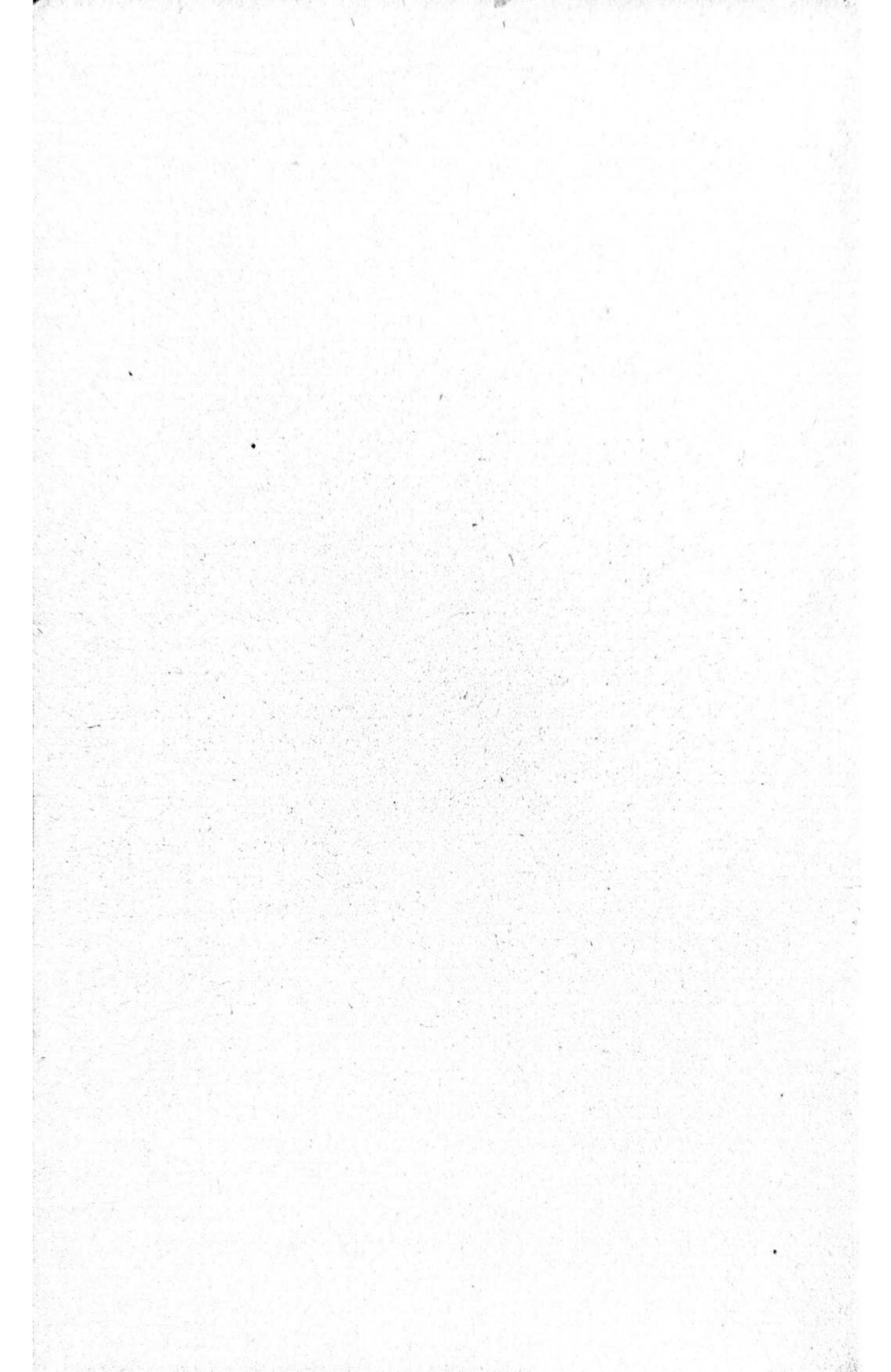
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To Stephen Snyder

PART 1



First, a few simple facts to set you straight on the basics, like my name, Shelley Skull. Shelley Skull. I'm thirty, and I'm deliberately heading in the direction of sainthood, via Scientology and Aleister Crowley's theory of Magick.

When I say sainthood, I don't mean what's usually meant. I mean unrestrained freedom from social hangups.

My story. I've only been in Manhattan a short time. I came here deliberately to look for a man called Rocco Sabine, about whom I'd heard a lot of tales. In fact, it was these tales that inspired my search. Maybe you've read or heard of a book called *In Quest of Corvo*? It's about an Englishman who gets so turned on by the books of a dead author, he begins investigating the man's private life, and finds him to be even more fascinating than his work. Well, that's like my quest. What I had heard of Rocco Sabine so fascinated me, I decided to try and track him down, perhaps eventually to write my own book about him.

My biggest problem was that Rocco hadn't been

seen or heard from much recently. Maybe, like Corvo, he was already dead.

It was spring in Manhattan. I was standing nude in a steam room, working on a head cold, when I became aware of someone circling me cautiously like a fly trying to decide whether to land. I gave him a glance: he was an older man, wearing a towel and sunglasses, short, slender, faggy and bald. His red lips were shockingly lubricious. He said, "You've got a body like a Greek statue."

I just smiled.

"Are you Italian?"

I nodded.

"What's your name?"

I was about to tell him, when a strange intuition prompted me to say, "Rocco Sabine."

His eyes widened and he gave a brilliant smile, and began to chat. His name was Thompson Thomas. I didn't say much, just gave him the straight blast from my baby blues while he nattered on, and pretty soon he was near drooling. He asked me for my address, so that he could invite me to a party he was planning. I figured he was really impressed or he would have tried to make me on the spot, so I gave it to him. Naturally, I never expected him to remember it.

A week later, however, along came a letter of invitation to the party. I'd taken the precaution of adding "R. Sabine" to my mailbox, but was still rather surprised. Not knowing what to expect at the party, I wore my sailor pants, a buff Stetson and a cap pistol on my hip. I thought to do my whole thing at once, which was just as well because the party was sardine-packed with dressy uptown faggots who raised eyebrows when they saw me. I was glad I had

my TRs¹ in, or I might have quailed beneath their torrid glances.

The bartender said to me, with a straight face, "I'm Dr. Ravenal. Haven't we met somewhere before?"

I allowed it was possible.

"Is your name really Rocco Sabine?"

That alarmed me. I asked why he asked.

"Well, you remind me of someone else. Someone whose name isn't Rocco at all."

Playfully, I leaned forward and whispered, "You're right! My real name— Oh, excuse me, I think I'm being hailed!" And I trotted away, leaving him ear-cocked, poised over the bar.

Thompson Thomas grabbed me, eager to introduce some enameled little Spanish number, all black hair and flashing eyes.

"This is Vittorio. He's Cuban."

"Spanish," corrected the near-dwarf. "Both my parents were Spanish."

"And this is Roccol" We shook hands.

"Like the Italian movie?" said the Cuban.

"Except that Rocco was played by a Frenchman," I pointed out.

"And you?"

"I'm English." I smiled, and Vittorio laughed. I thought he had a rare sense of humor, since I couldn't see the joke myself. I sat down, squeezing into a space next to him so narrow our four knees touched in a row. Thompson Thomas flitted away, smiling in stupid innuendo.

"Have you ever heard of me?" I asked the Cuban.

¹ "TRs" is a term in Scientology, referring to remaining at ease under any circumstances. And, actually, the faggots' responses were not so much torrid as speculative, apart from those which were downright denunciatory. These last made me feel good: I always know where I stand when I can see I've trespassed.

As I lit a cigarette, I noticed him slip a white powder into my martini. I didn't say a word.

"No," he replied. "Why?"

"Well, if you had, I wondered what you had heard."

"Oh." He considered. "Have you ever heard of me?"

"You? Why on earth should I have heard of you?"

He turned tea-colored. "I don't know. Why on earth should I have heard of *you*?"

I stood up abruptly, affronted for Rocco's sake, and took the opportunity to swap his drink for mine.

"I am Rocco Sabine," I told him stiffly, and moved away.

The rest of the party was a drag, after the Cuban slumped to the floor and was carried to a bedroom. No one had ever heard of Rocco Sabine, so my masquerade benefited me nothing. I didn't like any of the guests, and carefully refused any drink I didn't fix myself. I decided to leave early, one of the first and probably one of the drunkest. Thompson Thomas saw me to the door, his mouth grinding out a goodbye as though it was chewing garbage. I knocked over a china Buddha by the door, thinking to give him something to remember me by. The room fell silent.

"Goodbye all," I cried as Thompson closed the door in my face. I heard the buzz of excited voices start up again through the door, and told it, "My real name is Shelley Skull."

As I clumped downstairs, I wondered why the Cuban had tried to drug me.

The way the story goes, Rocco Sabine hit this unsuspecting town sometime in the early sixties. I

have a letter dated October 1962, which I obtained by writing to the *Times Book Review*, asking readers for information about Rocco. In the letter, Rocco describes the impact the city first made upon him. I guess that was before he began to notice his own impact on the city! I'd quote the entire letter to you, but it's not that good. On paper, Rocco sometimes sounds a bit of a pompous ass. But he tells a good joke, like the first American joke he learned, about a Momma Pigeon flying high over the city with a Baby Pigeon and she says, now watch this, kid, and she shits. And the shit goes circling down and down and round and round until, finally, *splatt!* it hits the sidewalk. Just goes to show you how far a little shit'll go in this town, says the Momma Pigeon.

Rocco was born of Irish-Italian parents, in Guernsey, of all places. No one knows much about his family. They're all dead.

He ran away from home when he was fifteen, and went to live in Paris. Actually, he didn't run away in the classic sense: he told his folks he was going, got a job and saved some money, packed his bags, kissed his mamma goodbye and set off into the wild blue yonder.

Which was good to him. Paris liked Rocco, and vice versa. World War II wasn't long done with, and the city hadn't gotten used to postwar tourists yet. Rocco lived in a youth hostel in the suburb of Malakoff. The hostel was really an unused football stadium. He pitched his tent on the field, surrounded by hundreds of other foreign kids, and he cooked over a gas burner in the "kitchen," washed under a spray of cold water from a rubber hose, and spent his days wandering the streets, his nights trying to communicate with the other foreign kids. And he wrote a book.

One day he met Jean Cocteau. He had taken his book to a publisher, who refused even to look at it. Moodily Rocco was staring into the window of an art gallery when a man, who was Cocteau, came up and stood next to him.

Rocco said, "Excuse me, sir, but is the Seine too cold for drowning in this time of year?"

Cocteau said, "No, my child, it never gets that cold. But why don't you come and have a coffee with me instead?"

So they went to the nearest café, which was just down the street.

Rocco told Cocteau the story of his book, while Cocteau played Dead Hand with Rocco's thigh. When his target was almost reached, Rocco crossed his legs, firmly imprisoning Cocteau's hand between them, and, grinning cheerfully, he asked Cocteau if he would invite him home. "Because I've never been inside a Frenchman's house," Rocco explained. "They don't seem too hospitable to foreigners."

Cocteau was evidently enraptured. He swept the lad into a taxi and drove him off into the country. There Rocco was astonished by the beauty and extravagance of Cocteau's estate. He allowed himself to be led into a red room filled with gold and mother of pearl, where he was fed dainties and cognac. As twilight settled, the two males, old and young, wandered through the garden. Cocteau took Rocco's hand and led him into many a cranny, a leafy grove, a darkening dell.

They sheltered beneath the outstretched arms of a great stone statue, to watch clouds of birds wheeling for a last time before seeking their nests. Cocteau took a tiny penknife from his waistcoat pocket and cut a budding rose for Rocco.

Rocco borrowed the knife to cut one for Cocteau. He chose a dead one. Cocteau kissed him on the lips for it, gently, without pushiness. Rocco grew frightened and asked to be sent home.

I was surprised to receive another invitation from Thompson Thomas, this time to attend a "swinging soiree" in my own name at his own house.

After that attempt to drug me at his last do, I wasn't too sure about Thompson Thomas, and turned to the *I Ching*² for advice. On the one hand, the book said go; on the other, it warned me I'd be safer in my own valley.

It was a familiar problem, like being torn between discretion and valor. After some thought I decided to go, under protection. I used a traditional spell, putting my finger to my lips, then, holding it before my face, turning a complete revolution and putting the finger back to my lips. I thereby made a girdle against evil that set up a counterspell to that forecast by the *I Ching* in its own cool way.

Thompson Thomas' house was a darkened brownstone in the East 90s, where very rich people live. Somewhat foolishly, I found this fact reassuring.

He met me at the door himself, wearing a weird getup of a gold lamé kaftan and sunglasses. Putting a finger to his lips to silence my greetings, he led me wordlessly up a flight of deeply carpeted stairs. I felt unpleasantly like a victim being led to a sacrificial altar.

There were about ten other guests already assembled, lounging indistinctly around a dark, fusty

² *I Ching*, or *The Book of Changes*, is a contemporary forgery based on an ancient Chinese work. Its main use is to delineate alternatives. C. Jung, who wrote its Western introduction, seems to think it is mystical.

room. The lights hadn't been turned on, and the only illumination came from the waning twilight. No one was speaking: the silence seemed velvet-lined.

Silhouetted against the windows in a way that separated them from everyone else were three seated young men. Thompson Thomas led me over to an empty chair beside them, so that I became the fourth of a pretty ominous grouping. Someone thoughtfully stuck a martini in my hand.

I didn't like the scene.³

"Now that we are all gathered together," whispered Thompson Thomas, "we can begin."

"I have to leave soon," I said. "I have a heavy date." I was improvising.

"Shhhh!"

I shrugged. "Well, so long as you know."

He glided to the back of the room and flicked a switch. Strobes, pointed directly at me, filled the room with their manic flicker. I was dazzled.

"What's happening?" I whispered to the guy next to me.

"Search me," he grunted. "I just came to deliver some liquor."

The fourth guy, farthest away from me, cried, "Hey, that hurts my eyes!" He jumped up and moved into a dark area of the room. A moment later the door opened and he was escorted outside by someone.

I liked the strobes. You stare at them long enough, you see colors. I didn't even blink when someone came and stood over me, looking down into my eyes through a metal tube of some sort. There's lots of ways of getting your kicks, I thought.

The strobes stopped suddenly. I turned to the man investigating my eyes. "What are you up to?" I

³ Hashish, which I had been smoking earlier, induces a superperception that some people experience as paranoia.

asked, recognizing him as the doctor who had bartended at T.T.'s last party. "What do you see in there?"

He looked at me quizzically. "Your cabbalic content," he told me, smiling. I smiled back.

"What about mine?" interrupted the boy from the liquor store.

"You don't have any."

This seemed to hurt the kid's feelings. He stood up angrily.

"Look, where's Mr. Thomas?" he demanded. "I got to go. I got to get back to the store." He walked bristling out of the room, with Thompson Thomas hurrying after him.

Two down and two to go, I thought. I still didn't know what this soiree was about, but I was glad I'd listened to the *I Ching* and protected myself. There seemed to be something creepy about Thompson Thomas and his crowd. I couldn't figure it out. I wondered whether it had anything to do with my early impersonation of Rocco Sabine. They weren't like the usual crowd of uptown, uptight faggots. When this group had sex, you could be sure they didn't stop at the four-letter-word acts.

Thompson Thomas materialized by my side again, alone.

"You're not afraid, are you?" he asked.

I shook my head. He smiled.

The kid next to me was wiping his eyes.

"You're out," said Thompson Thomas. He took the boy abruptly by the elbow and led him from the room.

That left just me.

"Did I win?" I laughed, glancing around. No one replied. No one but Thompson Thomas had spoken since I arrived.

When he came back, I stood up and cornered him. The others began to chat among themselves animatedly.

"Host," I said, "what's this all about? I don't go for Mystery Tours."

He laughed. "My dear, it's just an entertainment! Didn't you like the lights?"

"They were swell," I admitted. "But what's the game with me and those other guys in front of the window?"

"Darling!" He lifted his sunglasses for a second, giving me a startling glimpse of his eyes, whose whites were solid scarlet. "We were just picking our favorite, that's all!"

"Your favorite what?"

"Dish!" he laughed, throwing his arm around me lowly and pinching my right lobe.

I was beginning to get the picture.

I took inventory of the rest of the party. It was pretty dark, and I couldn't see everyone, but I didn't like the look of it. The odds were against me.

Fortunately, my Scientology training came to my rescue.

I strode over to the door, found the light switch and turned on the chandelier. Everyone blinked and moaned. Ignoring their protests, I announced loudly to the entire room, "My name is Shelley Skull. We didn't get a chance to meet yet."

Some little shrimp near me tittered.

"What are you laughing at?" I walked over and looked down at him. He shut up.

"And I'd like another martini, please," I told the room.

At once the doctor brought a jug of martinis and filled a glass for me.

"Would you care for a twist?" he murmured intimately.

"No," I told him. "I prefer mine straight!"

He winced and crept away.

Now I had the situation under control, I relaxed and sipped my drink. A small murmur developed into a sudden babble as they all began talking to each other at once.

"Tell me, Shelley . . ." Thompson Thomas came up behind me, tucked his arm in mine and led me over to the window. We stopped there and I disengaged. "Do you always like to make a scene?"

I smiled at him. "That's what scenes are for, isn't it?"

He smiled back. "You really do have the most beautiful eyes, you know," he said, staring into them. I wasn't surprised: I knew him for an eye man the moment I saw him.

"Perfect vision, are they?" he said idly.

I told him I could see everything.

He smiled blissfully: he was easy to please.

"But you have a pressing engagement?"

I nodded.

"What a shame. Tell me, where are your family?"

I pulled the orphan bit. He loved it.

"And what, er, do you do for a living? I mean, do you have a job or some, er, thing?"

I told him I had a thing.

"And what is that?"

I shrugged. "It's my own thing." He was making me paranoid. "What about you?" I went on, with an effort. "Do you have a thing?"

"I have two things," he said. "And one of them is money."

I told him, "Well, my thing takes care of money, too. It's all-encompassing."

"My dear!" he cooed. "Whatever can it be?"

At that moment a sudden wave of dizziness swept over me. I staggered, and grasped his arm for support.

"What's happening?" I croaked.

"You, darling!" Thompson Thomas laughed madly. "I told you!" He shook me off and I fell back against the window.

If there's one nugget I've learned in this city, it's "Never pass out in a stranger's house, unless it's a pass."

Another wave of dizziness swept over me. I needed fresh air, badly. Hanging on to the drape for support, I could barely make out Thompson Thomas' grinning face through my swimming vision. The fool didn't seem to realize how sick I was. Mustering my strength, I put my finger to my mouth and staggered around to make another protective girdle. To my surprise, Thompson Thomas jumped back as though I'd suddenly groped him. His fear sent a surge of strength through me, as I picked up the positive energy he lost. I drew myself up. My vision cleared.

"What have you done!" he hissed. The room fell quiet. Everyone stared at us.

But clearly, I thought, he knew what I had done. And unless he was diabolically connected he should have no reason to fear.

"Get thee behind me, Satan!" I barked at him.

He gasped. His mouth opened and a stinking hiss emerged, sweeping over me like poison gas, making me weak and dizzy again. I realized I had to get out of there before his Magick (so much money!) defeated mine. At that moment, too, I realized that it must have been another drugged martini that did me in.

I hawked up an oyster from the depths of my throat and spat it at him. It landed on the carpet just short of his feet. With a cry of horror he leaped back. I staggered over toward the door. Two men rushed to intercept me. I sent one in their direction, and, squealing, they jumped hastily out of its way. Like lightning I threw another over my shoulder at Thompson Thomas, creeping up behind me. It hit the bottom of his robe, and for a second we both watched it slide greenly down the gold lamé. Then he gave a little scream and fell backwards in a dead faint. Several of his friends leaped to catch him, and I seized the moment to wrench open the door and stagger down the stairs and out into the safety of the street.

When I got my head back together—a stroll in Central Park's Ramble worked wonders—I took a cab downtown to the Dirty Dick, which used to be Rocco's favorite bar. I thought maybe some of the old customers might remember him.

There was just one person at the bar, a good-looking, melancholy young man slugging back glasses of white wine. It was difficult to make contact with him; the bartender kept giving me dirty looks every time I cleared my throat.

Finally the stranger looked straight at me and said, "Well, aren't you going to say something?"

(It was a great Confront, and made me wonder whether he was a Scientologist.)

"Forgive me," I said, slithering over a number of bar stools to him. "I wasn't sure you weren't enjoying being alone."

His name, it turned out, was Peter Noble. It didn't take me long to pin him as a true drunk, romantic about his own lushness. He was the kind who liked to

pick up his glass, hold it to the light, catch your eye, shrug, and toss it off. But I liked him.

We drank at the Dirty Dick for several hours. He pulled a copy of *The Nation* out of his pocket and read me the funny parts, and I lied to him about a few things and in general we got along fine.

Eventually I told him about my Quest.

"Rocco Sabine?" he pondered, wrinkling his fine brow.

"About four years ago."

"I was here then," he admitted. "What did he look like?"

That was one of my problems: I didn't know what Rocco looked like. But I guessed he must have been good-looking, probably dark, being a combination Latin and Celt; one can imagine pretty much what to expect in the way of looks, and in the way of temperament too.

Peter couldn't get much horsepower going in his memory, so after a while we dropped the subject of Rocco.

"Have you been to the trucks yet?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"The trucks are the depths of degradation. Or the height of decadence, whichever you prefer."

"Really?"

He smiled. "They are the spirit level of your ability to sin. At the same time, they are a parole from the prison of your mind."

"Do go on." I was amused by his drunken rambling.

"They are dirty, bizarre, brazen, cold, ugly and irresistible. They are the siren calling Ulysses, the round hole calling the square peg—"

"The lover you daren't let in?" I ventured.

He glanced at me sharply. "If you like," he said,

and went on to explain in less flowery terms that there's a place down by the river where the truckies leave their vehicles parked in long dark rows, a haven for prowling homosexuals.

We arrived after midnight, after Peter had made a call, he said, to check the weather. The late hour was supposed to be good, because the later it got, the less interested were the cops.

Stumbling through mud and puddles, we groped our way along the very edge of the riverbank, hanging on to the backs of projecting trucks. It was very dark and spooky. We reached the end truck, and Peter climbed inside. I followed him, and was astonished to find it full of young men doing each other.

I didn't dig it at all; but I was fascinated.

Peter disappeared into the depths, invisible with darkness; it sounded like a muffled melee was going on down there. I hung cautiously around the open end, occasionally peering into the dark, and knocking away a few hands that slithered my way.

A little man wearing sunglasses appeared before me.

"Rocco Sabine?" he smiled.

Surprised, I shook my head. "Shelley Skull."

He smiled again, and melted back into the gloom. Seconds later, I was grabbed from behind and hustled toward the tailgate. I bit into the hand covering my mouth, reaching behind at the same time to grab my attacker's balls. He yelped and let me go. I whipped out my hatpin from behind my collar and whirled around, in time to see him vault over the tailgate and disappear under the truck.

I was furious. Stalking over to a great big fat guy nearby, I punched him on the nose. He really yelped, and every movement in the truck stopped.

"Keep walking, buddy!" I snapped.

His nose began to bleed. He groped for a handkerchief.

"What did you do that for?" he blubbered. "I never even touched you!"

"So don't," I told him curtly.

Peter came up. "What's happening?"

I lowered my hatpin. "Some of these guys think they're irresistible," I told him. "I let them know they weren't!"

"He attacked me," sobbed the fat man. "I wasn't doing a thing!"

The noise brought all the others down to see what was happening. I didn't like the way they surrounded us. Any moment now, I thought, we're going to be torn apart by a gang of outraged gang-bangers.

I gave Peter the nod. "Let's get out of here."

Peter and I became friendly after that night. Maybe he liked the sight of blood, I don't know. He called me frequently, and we'd go out drinking. I asked him what he did for a living, and he said he was trying to get his Master's, to become a teacher. I didn't believe him. I figured he was a pimp. He reminded me of someone I used to know, I couldn't place him, and when I told him this, he gave me what my mother used to call "an old-fashioned look." I was intrigued.

I filled him in on Rocco Sabine. One night, lolling on the steps of Cooper Union, I told him about the time Rocco was in Mexico.

"He was a man subject to weird and inexplicable adventures," I said. "Like the time he went to Mexico with his buddy. Or maybe they met there, I don't know. And don't ask me what their relationship was, because I don't know, no one knows, you'll have

to make up your own mind when you hear the story.

"Anyway, they were both just Yanquis to the Mexicans, and they used to hang out in this particular bar in Vera Cruz. They lived in different hotels, so this was where they would come looking for each other if they wanted to meet. Well, one night this other guy, we'll call him Harry, was in the bar drinking when Rocco comes in and talks and they have this great big fight, you see, that starts out with just a few quiet words, then gets vehement and then loud, and finally they're yelling at each other. Well, the Mexicans just shrugged, what do they know from Americans, they ignore them. Finally Rocco storms out.

"Couple of nights later, he comes up to Harry's hotel room and knocks on the door. Harry lets him in. Things are all right at first, but then they start arguing again and before you know it Rocco starts with the fists. He knocks poor Harry up and down the room and generally beats the shit out of him.

"Okay. The next night, Harry is sitting quietly in his room, there comes a knock at the door, it's Rocco again. Harry lets him in. Jesus Christ, would you believe it. Rocco starts hitting him again. I mean really hitting him, hurting him with his hands, you know? He leaves Harry crawling on the floor and walks out.

"Couple of days pass. Rocco walks into the bar again. Harry is sitting there. 'Let's go up to your place,' Rocco suggests. Like an idiot, Harry agrees. As soon as they get there, naturally Rocco beats him up again.

"So Harry gets a gun. And when Rocco comes knocking at his door a few days later, Harry lets him in. And when Rocco starts with the punches again, Harry starts with the gun. He shoots him in the belly.

"Well, the wound isn't bad. Rocco has to go to the hospital, of course, and while he's in there Harry beats it; no one ever sees him again. Eventually, Rocco gets better and is released.

"So a couple of years pass. We're back in New York. One day Rocco goes into a bar, and who does he see there but Harry. 'Hey, Harry,' he says, all friendly and bonhomie, 'let's forget about the past, let's have a good time!' So he sits down and they have a few beers and then Harry invites him up to his new place.

"So they go. As soon as they get there, Harry is closing the door when Rocco comes up behind him with a vase and crashes it down on his head, knocking him unconscious. Harry sinks to the floor. Rocco strips him naked, ties him hand and foot so he can't move, pops a couple of sugar cubes loaded with LSD into his mouth, and then pushes a pencil through each of his palms. And then he leaves him."

There was a long silence in which Peter just looked at me.

"Oh yeah?" he said finally.

I didn't know what he meant exactly.

"Sez who?" he continued.

I shrugged. I couldn't remember who told me that story; but I was willing to bet it wasn't Harry!

I received a late answer to my letter to the *Times Book Review* asking for information about Rocco. This one threw me for a loop.

DEAR SHELLEY:

You'll know who's writing this, I think, I must warn you, watch out! I don't know for what, or how, or when, but I do know for who. T.T. is

your enemy. For God's sake be careful—for both of our sakes too.

Naturally, it was unsigned.

I pondered all day on the writer's identity. T.T. was obviously Thompson Thomas, and I didn't need this note to tell me he was my enemy—two of his chemical-warfare parties had convinced me of that. But who had written it? The tone was friendly, almost familiar. An answer kept occurring to me, but it seemed so absurd I dismissed it. By the end of the day, however, I was forced to admit that it was the only one that fitted. It must have been sent by Rocco Sabine himself!

Who else could I endanger through my simple little investigation? Except, perhaps, Thompson Thomas, who was clearly out to stop me before I discovered too much. (By now I was certain that he had been behind that incident down at the trucks—though where this put Peter Noble I wasn't sure.)

It seemed clear that Rocco Sabine and Thompson Thomas had been partners in some activity at some time, probably something illegal. I laughed to think of the shock I must have given T.T. at the steam baths, introducing myself as Rocco! But what was the crime they were trying to keep hidden? Only something as serious as murder could justify such bizarre efforts as T.T. had been making to shut me up.

Chilled, I thought immediately of the one person in Rocco's life he would be likely to have murdered—that friend of his from Mexico whom I called Harry. Was that what this was all about? Rocco, with Thompson Thomas' help, was covering up Harry's murder? But if that were true, why would Rocco warn me against Thompson Thomas? It was all very

puzzling. Meantime, I was grateful to Rocco for sending me the note. It was good to know that he was still around, and aware of my existence.

The next day I reinforced my personal armaments in a dime store with a half-inch screwdriver. I already carried a hatpin, a bar of soap and three heavy rings. I had to keep my weapons legal in case I was ever frisked, and a screwdriver, it occurred to me, apart from being pretty creepy as a weapon, might prove very useful should Thompson Thomas ever successfully kidnap me and lock me in a boxroom or someplace.

I noticed that whenever I saw Peter he always brought the conversation around to sex. I wondered if he was after me.

"I have nothing against sex," I insisted. We were strolling around the Cloisters on a rainy afternoon.

"Then why don't you ever have it?" he asked, as though it was a casual dessert.

"Maybe I fuck my fist."

He groaned. "That's what I mean," he said. "What's wrong with people?"

"There's nothing wrong with people."

"So."

The conversation was getting nowhere.

"What do you do?" I asked.

"People, of course."

"And how long have you been doing them?"

He shrugged. "Oh, fifteen years."

"And you're not bored?" I was genuinely surprised.

He grinned. "Oh, everyone's different," he cracked.

I glanced around. That guard was still watching us suspiciously.

"In Scientology," I told Peter, "sex has to do with the fulfillment of the seven dynamics without which one is an incomplete and underdeveloped man. Now, the particular dynamic of sex is divided into two parts: the first is the sex act, and the second, its product, children."

"Children!"

"Hush!" I rapped my knuckles on an ikon.

"You mustn't touch the statues!" cried the guard, leaping forward.

"Yes, children," I continued. "The whole future of a race depends on its attitudes toward children. And a race which specializes in women for mental purposes instead of the creation of tomorrow's generation—"

"Women!" interrupted Peter. "How did they get into this?"

I refused to be baited, and cooled him with a blue glance. "—is a race which is dying," I finished.

"What," demanded Peter, "has all that got to do with your having sex?"

I blinked.

"Don't you see that I have to fulfill the second dynamic of sex in order to get all the way to Clear?"⁴

"Up Clear," said Peter succinctly.

We walked on in silence broken only by the trudging of the guard behind us.

"I don't believe . . ." said Peter, and hesitated.

"What?"

"I don't think you can still get it up, that's what."

I stared at him coldly. "What do you want?" I said. "A demonstration?"

He grinned. "Yeah."

⁴ To be clear, i.e., Scientologically brainwashed of previous moments of pain, is a major step in my pursuit of sainthood.

"Well, fuck you," I said grittily.

"Yeah." He grinned wider.

We sat down in the herb garden and stared out over the misty Hudson. The rain had stopped and the herbs were odoriferous. I could see the pasty face of the guard bobbing up and down inside one of the windows.

After a few minutes of silence, I opened my coat.

"Look!" I said.

Peter looked, and gasped.

The guard threw us out.

I don't know whether that afternoon had anything to do with it, but a couple of days later Peter called me with an extraordinary invitation. His friend Miss B., the Pepsi and Standard Oil heiress, was giving a "Saturn Ingress into Aries" party. Peter was invited and she asked him to bring along that "madman" he was always talking about. Apparently she meant me.

At first I wasn't interested. That phony astrology crowd leaves me quite cold, like fag molls, which they often are anyway. But then Peter added the irresistible lure. "Miss B. tells me that Rocco Sabine has been invited."

I accepted.

On the appointed night, I picked up Peter at his apartment, a very weird place on Macdougall Street. It was my first visit there.

His rooms were jammed with things, stuff and junk. There was a water-pipe sitting on something that might have been a packing case or a table. In all innocence, while Peter was in the kitchen making tea, I lit it and took a puff. I almost choked to death.

Peter didn't say a word; he just grinned at me as I coughed my way to a glass of water in the kitchen. I

knew then that he was a true drug fiend, mad about mystery. Had it been cockroach dung in that pipe, he wouldn't have told me.

"Do you take sugar in your tea?" he asked, when we were sitting in the living room again. He unwrapped a lump from a scrap of tinfoil, taking me by surprise. I hadn't realized it was going to be one of those parties.

"Er, yes."

In spite of myself, I quivered when he dropped it into my cup. But after I tasted it, I asked him for another lump; I like my tea sweet.

While we waited, I prodded Peter about Miss B. Rumor had it that she had suffered a prolapsed sex change operation, making her the world's first man-made hermaphrodite. This he coyly refused to confirm.

"Are you one of her gigolos, then?"

He blushed. "No! We're just good friends."

"Aye aye . . ."

He insisted he was telling the truth: she was merely helping him to get through college. I figured he was trying to perpetuate the myth about his being a student.

"You see, my father works for Pepsi," he went on, a little desperately, "and that's how I got to meet her. Of course I never told my dad! He'd kill me if he found out."

"If he found out why she's putting you through college?"

He hesitated, a sudden smile showing a certain degree of boyish charm. "Well," he murmured, "he might understand if I told him it was for services already rendered, if you know what I mean."

I knew exactly what he meant: the bum.

We traveled down a kaleidoscope to Miss B.'s place. Peter, whom I had gradually forgiven, said it was just a cab down Broadway, but he couldn't fool me. I used to own a kaleidoscope.

I was feeling very good. I was even looking forward to the party, which must have been the result of the tea—and, perhaps, the anticipated meeting with Rocco Sabine.

"Peter," I said at one point during the ride, "what does a 'Saturn Ingress into Aries Party' mean?"

He made a mouth. "Don't ask! Everyone has to put on black, red or purple. Like a witches' Sabbath. Miss B. digs the occult. She particularly liked me because I'm a Capricorn and Capricorns are supposed to be the sexiest men."

I glanced at him in surprise: he was smirking. It was a side of his personality I hadn't seen before, and I pursued it quickly.

"Do *you* think you're particularly sexy?"

He blushed, revealing that he did. I smiled, and gave him a break.

"Why black, red or purple?"

"They belong to Saturn, I believe."

I knew that was untrue, and thought it strange. It seemed more reasonable, however, when we arrived at our destination, which was an enormous fortress. Peter led me by the arm up a flight of stone steps to where a gnarled gnome was butling at a big iron door. He turned us over to a flock of fluttering fairies in cloaks and masks, and they swept us into a dressing room, pinching our buns to move us on. I was about ready to lash out with my fist when I caught Peter's frown, so I contented myself by giving one little bitch whose pinches had a touch of malice in them a gentle pat on his cheek. They all stopped pinching after that.

Inside the dressing room, someone shut the door and the others helped us strip. (Note: Before Scientology, I would have been embarrassed at being stripped in front of a friend.)

When we were quite denuded, they draped us in flimsy silk happi-coats, garments obscene in the best Supreme Court sense of the word. I thought Peter looked terrific. Our dressers stood back and twittered glowing reviews; I must admit I felt pretty sexy.

Outside the door a couple of enormous Negroes were waiting for us, clad, the corner of my eye told me, in silk leopard-skin jockstraps. They marched us over to an iron spiral staircase sunk into the floor. Peter led the way down, and I followed, suffering an unusual attack of nerves. I was beginning to realize that my mother's injunction about remaining at ease in a large social gathering, "Imagine them in their underwear," wasn't going to be much use tonight.

The staircase seemed a descent into hell itself, although it just led to the party. A brilliant red light illumined the steps from below, and wisps of smoke and whiffs of incense kept floating up as we went down and down, round and round . . .

It was an endless trip. I grew dizzy and closed my eyes, which was a big mistake. Immediately, I was hit by a vision of such colors and shapes, I sank back on a step. It was cold. Opening my eyes, I saw that Peter had already vanished from sight. I hurried after him, tripping over my own feet so that I tumbled on the last few steps, ending up heavily on my rump on a cold stone floor.

"Well well well!" cooed a voice above me. "What have we here?"

Hastily I pulled my robe down and stood up.

Peter said, grinning, "This is my friend Shelley

Skull, Miss B. You asked me especially to bring him. Shelley, this is Miss B."

I looked into a pair of sunglasses and saw my own face reflected perfectly. "How do you do?" I smiled at me. The person wearing the glasses nodded them, and I felt a hand like a wisp of chiffon pass down my bare arm.

"Are you Italian?" murmured Miss B.

Taken aback, I swallowed a gasp and examined her face intently. Was it possible that behind those sunglasses, beneath that fright wig, under that diaphanous shroud, was *Thompson Thomas*?

Peter answered for me. "No, but he likes to think he is," he chuckled, obscurely amused.

Miss B. circled me, as though she might buy.

"Charming, charming," she told Peter. "What is his sign?"

"Taurus."

"Aha! Ah, yes, I can see his horns—"

"With Saturn rising."

I wondered how he knew.

"Oho!" cried Miss B. "Then tonight is his night! He could be dangerous!"

"I am dangerous," I told her, and tipped with a cold smile.

I looked around. We were in a strange, long room with one wall made of glass; beyond was a small indoor swimming pool, surrounded by what looked like hundreds of guests. Clouds of smoke filled the air, weird lights were going on and off, and every so often there was a big splash and a roar from the crowd as someone got pushed or jumped into the pool. It looked more and more like the beginnings of a devilish orgy—not really the place for a Scientologist of my stamp at all.

I interrupted Miss B.'s chat with Peter. "Is Rocco Sabine really going to be here tonight?"

She gave Peter a funny look, which I didn't quite get.

"Why, I believe so," she said. "As a matter of fact, I think he's already arrived. Why don't you go and look for him?"

I hesitated, uncertain of the wisdom of leaving Peter.

"Go on with you," Miss B. cried. "I want to talk to your boy friend anyway."

I frowned as Peter cackled. Miss B. turned me around and gave me a little shove in the direction of the swimming pool. I kept going, fully aware of her sunglasses burning two holes in my buttocks.

But I wasn't fooled. I knew perfectly well that she was Thompson Thomas, and that she was up to some insane machinations with Peter. But what? And why? I couldn't figure it out. Why was she in disguise? What was her relationship with Peter? Had she told him that I'd passed myself off as Rocco at her first party? I mean, *his* first party? And was Rocco really here tonight?

The only depressing question that occurred to me as I plunged into the party was, could I trust Peter any more?

I was instantly engulfed in smoke and people. I was knocked, banged, groped and smoothed as I squeezed my way through the seminude horde. When I reached the edge of the pool, I stopped to get my breath, and someone shoved a paper goblet into my hand. I chuckled to myself and dumped it over my shoulder into the pool. Unfortunately, I happened to throw it into the face of a large fat

man who was climbing out at my feet. He gasped and fell back into the water. I kneeled down and helped tug him out when he surfaced. For a moment he lay gasping at my feet, a stranded tuna.

"What did you do that for?" he finally spluttered. "I never did anything to you!"

I tried to apologize, but he wouldn't listen.

"It's a lousy party anyway," he blubbered on. "That's the third time I've been pushed in already. They seem to think it's *funny!*" He glanced around angrily; people nearby frowned back,

"Cool it," I hissed at him. "Don't make a nuisance of yourself, you'll regret it tomorrow!"

He seemed to like my tone or something. He leaned forward and dried his face on a corner of my robe before I could stop him.

"What did you say your name was?"

I told him, slightly disgusted, and added that I was a private eye.

"Oh, I've quite an eye for privates myself," he giggled, lumbering awkwardly to his feet.

"I noticed."

"Whatever are you doing here, bodyguarding someone?"

I had to disengage his fingers from my left nipple before I could step back.

"Yes," I told him. "Myself!" And, with a foot to his belly, I pushed him back into the pool.

My foot felt disgusting afterward. I limped through the crowds, looking for a man I had never seen but whom I knew I would recognize at first sight. Eyes glinted at me, curls were tossed, silk robes were flicked, flesh was exposed. The whole place smelt like a locker room with incense. I think it was Incense for the Dead, an Indian brand.

Someone grabbed my arm. I stopped.

"Are you the one that's looking for, er, Rocco Sabine?"

I nodded, looking him over. He was a teen-age monument to pimples.

"He's over there." The Mess giggled.

I looked in the direction he pointed, but couldn't see anything for the clouds of smoke. Thanking him with a curt nod, I pushed my way through a protesting group and found myself in a weird, stone-walled corner, like a dungeon. Water and greenslime were running down the walls, and the unclothed body of a man, gaunt and brown, was lying face down in a pool of filth. Although his face was turned away, I knew that he was Rocco Sabine, and that he was dead.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I spun around to find Peter.

"Look!" I turned back to show him Rocco's body, and saw that it had totally disappeared. So had the water, the slime, the very dungeon; there was nothing before us but a blank plaster wall.

"But it was there—" I blurted, and stopped abruptly, shocked by this confrontation with power.

Peter smiled. He put his arm around my shoulders and led me away. "Don't worry," he said kindly. "I'm sure it'll turn up again, whatever it was."

I shuddered, knowing how easily such a remark could enchant me.⁵ I was deeply disturbed by what had just happened. Had it been a mere LSD tripette, or was it a sample of Miss B.'s party tricks? Or was it—and I hated to make allowance for this—an honest vision?

⁵ Recent sociological studies have finally understood what Magick has known forever. "You call a kid a dope, he acts like a dope. You treat him like a brain, he gets cleverer." (Prof. E. E. Hanne, *New York Times*.)

"Have you seen the movie yet?" Peter asked brightly.

I shook my head warily. "I'm not sure."

"Come!"

I followed him out of the pool room and up a flight of stone stairs to a dark corridor lined with doors. Obscure figures flitted by us, looking like unfriendly wraiths. I frowned at them.

Peter halted at the end of the corridor. A man stood there, his eye to a hole in the wall, his body jerking spasmodically under its silk robe. Peter tapped him on the shoulder.

"Just a minute," breathed the man ecstatically, not even looking around.

"Now!" snapped Peter. He grabbed the man by the scruff of the neck, pointed him down the hall and shoved him into orbit. I laughed. I'd never seen him so butch before. He bowed ironically and waved me to the hole in the wall. He crowded up behind me, looking over my shoulder.

It seemed to be one of those Cinecitta Roman spectacles, a cheapie. In a dark chamber a young Blond God (perhaps Richard Harrison) was wrestling with two Attackers, in a scene clearly meant to depict Good fighting off the Spirits of Evil. They really went at it, rolling all over the bed and floor. Unusually, they were stark naked, which made some of their holds look very classic.

Behind me, Peter was growing restless.

"Do you like it?" he whispered, and changed his stance slightly so that I felt a sudden jab from his hard-on, which until then I hadn't even noticed. Shocked, I jerked my head back sharply, catching Peter on his front teeth. We both yelped, my hand flying to my crown as his flew to his teeth.

"Serves you right!" I snapped. I was furious with

him. I looked around, found an ajar door, and slammed it in his face as he tried to follow me into the room beyond.

For a moment I was blinded by the plunge into darkness, and stood rigid. From nowhere, hands grabbed me and dragged me onto the bed. I gasped and tried to fight free, but other hands grabbed my legs and ankles and held me down. My robe was stripped from my body and used to tie my hands to the wall above my head.

My eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and I made out a face, close to mine, staring at me intently. I cried out, scared, and a hand clamped over my mouth. The face was that of the young Blond God in the movie I'd just been watching! And the two men holding my legs were his attackers in the flick!

Confusion almost destroyed me. I teetered on the edge of panic. But then I relaxed and stopped struggling, realizing that rationality had fled and I'd better accept it. Besides, I should conserve my strength in case I got a chance to escape.

Seeing that I had quieted down, the three actors conferred. They seemed to have forgotten their previous fight to ally before a common danger—me. Unless, I thought, the whole thing, including the movie bit, was rigged. And if that was so, I had less reason to trust Peter than ever.

Meantime, my captors had come up with a few ideas of their own. The Blond God leaned over me, his hand still covering my mouth.

"What do you want?" he asked softly, in English. Did they think I was a spy? I shook my head.

He stared at me. "What would you like, then?"

Bribery? Unsure, I shook my head again. A steely look came into his eyes. I recognized it, and prepared for the worst. It was Torture Time.

He gave an abrupt signal to his slaves. They picked up my legs and bent them back above my head, exposing my most vulnerable parts to the Blond God's whim as he knelt before me. We stared into each other's eyes: he wasn't Richard Harrison. Holding my gaze, he slowly lowered his head. I waited. As his eyes sank from view, I farted into his face. He gasped and fell backwards. I kicked up with both legs, catching his gaping slaves full on their jaws. They sprawled away. I wrenched my hands free of their bonds, leaped to my feet, flung open the door and raced down the corridor. At its end there was a flight of steps. I half ran, half fell down them. No one seemed to be in pursuit of me. On the first landing I found a tiny broom closet and locked myself inside. Shaking, I located a bucket and sat on it to recover my cool.

It was as black as night in the closet. As I calmed down, I had a most peculiar feeling that I was actually sitting on a bucket in space. All around me the darkness stretched off into eternity. When I stared at the blackness, I discovered it was not really black at all, but was really made up of zillions of little colored pieces all linked together. I also discovered that I could summon one of those pieces for a close-up inspection. I merely had to look directly at it, and it would zoom up for a close-up, a brilliant dancing color that would go into a whole series of changes before its number was over.

My space trip was rudely interrupted by a violent hammering on the door. At first I thought confusedly that a meteor had hit the ship, but then I remembered I was in a movie, not space.

"Who's there?" I cried, when the hammering didn't stop.

"Me, Dopey!"

Dopey? I didn't know anyone named Dopey. Unless this was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. In which case, who was I?

"Are you going to open up?" the voice said.

"Just a minute," I told it. "Who am I?"

There was a brief silence.

"Shelley?"

It was a low blow, getting me right in my emotions. A wave of hysteria swept over me, sending water gushing out of my eyes and nose. I fell off the bucket onto my knees, sobbing and spluttering, my hands scrabbling at the lock on the door.

"Help me!" I cried. "Oh, help me, help me!" The door suddenly swung open. A tall man stood there, and helped me to my feet.

"Dopey?" I fell into his arms, weeping.

"There, there . . ." He patted me on the back.

In a few moments, mostly because I needed badly to blow my nose, I pulled myself together.

"Have you got a handkerchief?" I asked him.

Shaking his head, he reached behind me and pulled a string that switched on a brilliant light. The shock was like a cold shower. I sobered up at once, noticing that I was stark naked and that the man was Peter Noble.

"You're having quite a time, aren't you?" he said, smiling. He took off his robe and tore it in two, then tore a piece off and gave it to me.

"Blow your nose on this," he said, and gave me the other piece of material. "And put this on."

He fashioned a kind of loincloth for himself out of the remaining material. I copied him with my piece. We looked at each other and laughed; we looked like a pair of Jon Halls.

"I'd very much like something to drink," I told him.

"Good. Follow me."

He led me up the stairs to a water cooler, the kind you see in offices. The water was good, freezing cold so you had to swallow it in lumps. I drank till I was breathless, then poured handfuls over my head; they wriggled down my body like incisions in the flesh.

"I've got a surprise for you," said Peter, watching my antics indulgently. "If you feel up to it?"

I looked at him thoughtfully. Why did he think I would mistrust him? "What is it?"

"Rocco Sabine. He's waiting for you."

I stared at him. He smiled back easily. "No," he said, "I'm not putting you on. Do you want to meet him?"

I leaped at him, hugging him so hard we both fell back against the wall.

"Mind my teeth!" he cried.

He led me along a dark corridor with many doors. It seemed strangely threatening, and I kept my eyes skinned until we reached our destination, which was a small, bright room painted peyote green. There, seated on a kitchen chair, smoking a cigarette and wearing a domino, was Rocco Sabine.

At least, that's who Peter said it was when he introduced me.

I looked at the man's proffered hand, and I knew he wasn't Rocco. I didn't say anything.

"I have a treat for you," the man murmured. From the folds of his cloak he withdrew a loaded hypo. "A new drug!"

I turned to Peter. "Prove it."

"Prove what?"

"Prove that he's Rocco Sabine."

"Prove it! How can I?" He laughed nervously. "Do you think he's carrying his birth certificate on him?"

"Remember the Mexican adventure?" I said.

"Rocco has the scar of a bullet wound on his stomach."

There was a silence.

The impostor stood up, wrapping his cloak around himself and his hypo.

"If you think," he told Peter with a toss of his head, "that I'm going to exhibit my stomach to a perfect stranger, you've got another thing coming!"

"If President Johnson could do it?" I smiled.

"Rocco Sabine is not President Johnson!" The man flounced indignantly out of the room, giving Peter an annoyed glance. We stood there looking at each other. I was beginning to feel cold.

"Why did you do that?" I asked him.

He seemed about to deny doing anything, but then he shrugged and said, "I thought it might help you."

"That was Thompson Thomas, wasn't it?"

He looked at me quickly. "That was Miss B."

Ah, yes, I had forgotten that bit of business. I began to shiver. The green walls were making me feel sick, reminding me of past bad experiences. I sat down on the chair and hugged myself. "Peter," I said, "I'd like to go home now."

He sighed. "You know your trouble?" he asked. "You don't know which end is up."

We changed clothes and slipped out of a side door, "to avoid excuses," Peter said. We took a cab to my place. He leaned out of the cab door as I crossed the pavement.

"You're sure you're all right?" he asked. "You wouldn't like me to come up with you?"

I shook my head, absolutely exhausted and lacking any desire to communicate. Upstairs, I took two Seconals.

Later, relaxing in bed, I wondered about his

strange attempt to pass off Thompson Thomas (Miss B.) as Rocco Sabine. I remembered the mysterious note I'd received warning me about T.T. Both the note and tonight's impersonation, had it succeeded, would have kept me blithely believing that Rocco Sabine was still alive. Was that their purpose? Was Rocco, in fact, dead? Had I been barking up exactly the wrong tree, thinking it was Rocco who had killed Harry when it was really Harry who had killed Rocco? New dimensions opened up to me.

One last thought chilled me before I dropped off to sleep: Harry = Peter Noble.

It took me a couple of days to get over Miss B.'s latest party. Then I made arrangements with an actor called Carlos from a local church theater to come with me and pretend to arrest Peter. I thought we'd shock him into blurting out some truths about his connection with Rocco Sabine.

Carlos didn't look much like a plainclothes detective, which was to be his role. He was short and dumpy and had a heavy Spanish accent. But he swore he was an excellent actor, so I was keeping my fingers crossed.

At 8:30 P.M. we took a cab to Peter's house and knocked on his door. He wasn't home. I found his spare key taped to the wall above the door frame, and we went inside to wait for him. So as not to warn him, we sat in the dark. It was a strange feeling, sitting in a suspected murderer's apartment with the lights off, in the company of a short foreigner you hardly knew. Carlos didn't say anything, and, after a while, feeling the silence getting a bit heavy, I asked him pleasantly if he was a married man.

The question seemed to scare him. He crossed his legs and said, "No. Are you?"

"Yes," I said, thinking to reassure him so that he could uncross his legs again.

"Ah so?" He sounded surprised. "How long have you been married?"

"Three years," I said casually. "The worst is yet to come."

We both laughed at that one and the atmosphere lightened perceptibly. He uncrossed his legs.

"What's your wife's name?" he asked.

"Victoria."

"Ah so? I have a cousin named Victoria."

An alarm bell went off in my mind.

"Ah so?" I said offhandedly. "Male or female?"

"I beg your pardon?"

I realized my question was a bit crude, and rephrased it. "Your cousin isn't a faggot by any chance, is he?"

"A faggot? What is a faggot, please?"

I frowned. Everyone knows what a faggot is; why did he pretend not to know? Curious, I decided to go along with his little game.

"A faggot," I said, "is one of several things. It is a way of stitching a seam, it is a bundle of firewood, it is a Lady, or it is a Welsh meatball."

There was a short silence. "Sí," said Carlos, "I think my cousin is a lady, a'right."

"Then he's certainly not my wife!" I chuckled.

After a moment, Carlos said, "Is your wife a . . . faggot?"

I was annoyed by the question, but dealt with it in a calm, Scientological manner. "Do fish swim?" I asked him.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Okay," I said cheerfully. "I will repeat the question. Do fish swim?"

"I don' understand."

"Okay," I said cheerfully. "I will repeat the question. Do fish swim?"

He didn't answer this time, and the conversation lapsed back into silence.

There was a noise outside the door. Someone was coming in. I signaled Carlos, and we positioned ourselves on both sides of the door. A key scratched in the lock. The door swung open, and Peter came in.

He saw Carlos right away, and kicked him in the belly. Carlos collapsed on the floor, making a funny "ufff" sound. As Peter leaned over him, I leaped on him from behind to prevent him doing more damage to the actor. My weight flattened Peter and we landed heavily on top of Carlos, who made another funny "ufff" sound. Peter brought his elbow back and clipped me on the cheek. I grabbed him by the hair and banged his head a couple of times on the back of Carlos'. Carlos didn't make any more noises. I only got in a couple of blows when Peter wrenched himself up and shoved me backward. He jumped to his feet and ran out of the door and down the stairs, yelling, "Help, help, police!"

I almost panicked. The last thing I wanted was a genuine policeman, not yet having any definite proof that Peter had killed Rocco Sabine. There was only one thing to do. I leaped over Carlos' body, flung open a window leading to a fire escape, then backtracked to a large packing case next to the couch and crept inside. I found I could see everything through a big bunghole.

Within a couple of minutes, Peter came pounding up the stairs, followed by an unbelievably young cop and several neighbors.

"Here's one of them," cried Peter, nudging Carlos with his foot. Carlos moved and groaned. "I man-

aged to knock him out," Peter went on boastfully. "But the other one must have gotten away."

Someone cried, "The window's open!"

The cop went over to the window and looked out. He saw no one, naturally, and closed it again. Without saying a word, he knelt beside Carlos and examined him.

Carlos opened his eyes and batted them at the cop.

"Where am I?" he moaned.

The cop looked at Peter, who said, "Fifty Macdougall, apartment ten."

"You hear that?" the cop said gruffly to Carlos.

Carlos put a hand to his head. "Aw, my head," he moaned. The cop helped him stand up. "What happened?"

"That's what we'd like to know," said the cop.

Carlos looked around the room. I could see he was trying to think of a story they would accept. Finally he said, "Where's the faggot?"

The cop glanced at Peter, then said to Carlos, "What faggot?"

"There was a faggot here," Carlos said. "He brought me up here and—"

"Okay, okay," interrupted the cop, putting up a hand to silence him. He turned to Peter's neighbors, clustered in the doorway. "All right, folks, back to bed, the fun's over. Come on, now, let's break it up."

Grumbling, they dispersed. The cop closed the door and turned back to Carlos.

"Okay," he said. "Let's have the whole dirty story."

I listened agog as Carlos unfolded a vivid tale of seduction. He described himself as a poor innocent Cuban boy who happened to be standing on a street corner . . .

"What corner was that?" interrupted the cop.

"Er, Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue," Carlos said. I almost laughed aloud.

"When," went on Carlos, "this faggot stopped and said he'd give me ten bucks for an hour's conversation. He said he was lonely. . . ." So Carlos, suspecting nothing, came home with the guy, which was here, he guessed, and they sat down and began talking, when suddenly in comes this other one (indicating Peter) and starts beating him up.

The cop said to Peter, "Do you live here with someone else?"

Peter shook his head.

"What about my ten dollars?" Carlos cried.

"Forget it," advised the cop.

"Aren't you going to arrest him?" said Peter, quite indignant.

"What for?" said the cop and Carlos together.

"Breaking and entering or something."

The cop pointed out that no one had broken in. From the tone of his voice, I could tell he was getting more suspicious of Peter's story than of Carlos'. Peter could obviously see this, too, and his tone turned defensive. Finally they settled the whole thing with Peter giving Carlos five dollars—he said it was all he had—and the cop escorting Carlos off the premises. As soon as he closed the door on them, Peter groaned and collapsed onto the couch. I was dismayed: I'd been hoping he would go into the bedroom, so I could sneak out. But I was stuck in the packing case, which was increasingly uncomfortable, and I didn't know what to do.

Luckily, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, the light was off. I didn't know what time it was, but I guessed Peter had gone to bed. Slowly I eased my way out of the case and

stood up. Unfortunately, my left leg had gone to sleep, and it gave way, pitching me forward so that I knocked over a table full of junk, making a terrible din.

There was a smothered cry from the bedroom, as though Peter had woken up and dived beneath the sheets. Unthinkingly, I almost called out, "It's all right, it's only me," but then I remembered I wasn't supposed to be there at all. Charity begins at home, I told myself, and hobbled quickly out of the door and down to the street.

Two blocks away I slowed my pace, curious about a dark little figure who had chosen the dark doorway of a funeral parlor to cruise from. My eyes met his, and a shock went through me. It was Carlos!

I took off, certain I could outrun him, as I did. At Bleeker Street I slowed down, thinking I should call and calm Peter. The nearest phone was in the Kettle of Fish, but I'd been eighty-sixed from there. A block farther north I found a booth-cum-pissoir.

"Hello?" Peter sounded exhausted. Then I realized I shouldn't be calling him, I should be at home, waiting for his call to me, which he had undoubtedly been trying to put through. But now that he'd answered, I had to say something: I didn't want to make him feel paranoid.

"Hello," I said hastily, "I can't talk to you now, I'm in a terrible hurry." I hung up, and raced home.

As I opened my apartment door the phone was ringing. I picked it up, smiled to myself and drawled, "Well, Peter, what's gone wrong now?"

Peter's intuition seemed highly developed. Somehow he guessed I was involved in that Carlos scene at his house. I played innocent, of course, but he still bawled me out over the phone for ten minutes

before he finally slammed the receiver down. I hadn't seen or heard from him since.

That was how I knew he was beginning to crack. It would only take a few more taps to split him wide open; then we'd discover the truth about him and Rocco Sabine.

I pondered for several days on my next move, but couldn't come up with much. Eventually I turned to the Bible for inspiration.

Samson and Delilah was the first thing to hit me. Peter had the perfect head of hair for a Samson: he was the leonine type, his profile looking as though it was just relief from his flowing mane. And I knew he was vain about it. But I wasn't too sure at first about the kind of Delilah I'd make. My ego told me I could do it, but my mirror raised an eyebrow, particularly since I didn't really know what Peter's taste in women was. Finally I decided that I would be safe if I stuck to the classic image, so I modeled myself on Hedy Lamarr in the De Mille flick.

I'd never worn drag before, and found it hilarious getting into it and so on. When I was finished, I thought I looked more like a pirate than Delilah; but, from what I knew of Peter Noble, that seemed as likely to appeal to him as anything, so I didn't change a thing.

I wore a black wig and a sleeveless bolero, and glued a plastic emerald in my navel; around my waist I tied a blue chiffon scarf split up to the thigh, with net jockey shorts beneath to help the illusion. I twisted a string of yellow Haitian beans around one ankle—barefoot, of course. And with Dayglo pens I tattooed ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics on each side of my nose and along my forearms. I looked like quite a number.

Behind my right ear, in a little bubble-gum sack,

I hung twenty Nembutals. They were hidden by my wig.

I took a cab to Peter's house, amused that the driver didn't even give me a second glance.

Peter wasn't at home, which was a blow. At first I thought I'd go in anyway, using his spare key, but then I realized that this might confirm his suspicions that I'd engineered the Carlos episode. I was stymied—for a moment.

I knocked on the door of Peter's neighbor. A young kid with an early Shirley Temple hairdo answered. He smiled in a very friendly way and said, "Come on in."

If he hadn't been a Flower Child, I would have hesitated. But I knew I could trust him with anything except my pot. And since I wasn't carrying, I followed him into his living room.

There were four other young kids sitting on the floor around a low table. One of them was a girl. She had the longest hair of all, right down to her breasts. They all gave me dazzling hippie smiles, the kind that would make a sparrow sing.

"I guess you haven't come to collect the rent?" laughed the boy who let me in.

I hesitated. "Why?" I asked. "Do you have it handy?"

They all laughed. He shook his curls.

The girl said to me, "You're really beautiful, you know that? I mean, really *beautiful*!"

What can you do in the face of such love and admiration? I gave her my sunniest smile; the whole room lit up, literally, I mean, taking their joints out of a little tin box marked "Climax: Plug Tobacco." The boy who answered the door offered me one. Even though I have pledged at Scientology to avoid drugs (including aspirin!), I accepted for politeness'

sake. He passed me a cushion and I sat down on the floor and lit up.

"My name is Jean-Paul McQueen" said the boy with the curls. "This is Evo" (pointing out a boy with dramatic rings around his eyes), "and this is Clyde" (pointing out a boy in a checkered cap), "and this is Daybreak" (that was the girl), "and this is, er, what's your name again?" he asked the fourth kid.

"Alice," said the boy, blushing prettily. He was the blond innocent type.

"My name is Shelley Skull," I told them directly.

Jean-Paul whistled.

"I like your hair," said Evo.

"Do you spray it?" asked Daybreak.

"No," I told her. "I use Dippity Doo."

She looked interested.

"You iron yours, don't you?" Alice asked her.

"No, that's bad for the ends. I use a new Clairol product called Straight-On."

"How does it work?" Jean-Paul was fingering his own curls thoughtfully.

Daybreak tossed her head to demonstrate, and her hair flew lazily around her shoulders as in a commercial.

"Yes," I said, impressed.

"You can't do that?" Although her face was innocent, I thought I detected a female challenge in her tone.

"Oh, I think I can," I said casually, and shook my wig from side to side. A little bag flew out from behind my ear and landed in the middle of the table. They all stared at it, fascinated.

"Can we look inside?" murmured Jean-Paul.

I laughed. "Sure, go ahead!"

Daybreak grabbed the sack. "Oh, let me." She

opened the string and poured the capsules onto the palm of her hand. They looked deadly and beautiful.

"Oh!" She was as impressed, I thought, as myself.

"What are they?" someone else asked in a low voice.

I told them.

Daybreak wanted some, and Jean-Paul reproved her for her greediness.

"Oh, I don't mind," I told him. "Certainly, have some, there's plenty."

They all took some, pressing me to join them. Naturally, I couldn't, having other business to attend to. My eyes lit upon a pair of scissors lying on the table to a *Ripley's "Believe It or Not" Coloring Book*. I realized I had forgotten to bring my own, and didn't know if Peter even owned a pair.

"I might want to borrow your scissors later on," I mentioned to Jean-Paul.

"Sure. . . ." He blinked at me languorously; the Nembutals were hitting him quickly. "Let's all have another joint!" He passed the Climax box around again.

By the time I finished my new joint, only Alice was still awake. The others were lying in a graceful tangle on the floor. Alice, I could see, was fighting it. His eyelids were dying to close, you could watch them droop, but then he'd smarten up again. I got bored waiting for him to drop off. Leaning over, I snapped my fingers before his eyes and said, "Sleep, baby." He dropped right off.⁶

So they were all asleep, lying around my feet like

⁶ To my knowledge, there is no such technique available for inducing sleep in Scientology, although a snap of the fingers and the instruction "Come up to present time" can bring insane people back to sanity. This was an improvisation of mine, or, if you prefer, intuitive Magick.

so many puppies. My heart went out to them: their innocent grubbiness touched me. These kids needed someone to look after them, they were so sweet. I felt like a Flower Father. I leaned over Clyde and examined his face. That heart-stopping area around the jawbone where the bumf was thickening into his first whiskers! The healthy blackheads of a sprouting youth! I wondered why he hid that fine forehead, those delicate temples, under a head of hair that was too skimpy to look good long.

An inspiration seized me. I should cut his hair! That way I would be doing him a favor and also getting practice for cutting Peter's later. I seized the scissors and began snipping.

As I cut away, a kookie idea hit me. I imagined working on them all, making them totally bald, so that when they woke up and saw each other . . . The picture of them waking was so hysterical that I accidentally dug the scissors into Clyde's scalp. He didn't wake up, but the sight of blood sobered me somewhat, and I put my mind to the job.

Within half an hour, I had the lot of them trimmed down to a kind of patchy baldness. I hoped they'd also see the funny side of it when they awoke. Actually, I thought, it would be impossible for them *not* to see the funny side, at least in time.

When I was done, I remembered why I had originally knocked on their door—to call the Dirty Dick.

There was a phone in the bedroom. I dialed the number and asked the bartender if I could speak to good old reliable Peter Noble.

He came to the phone sounding rather annoyed.

"What?" he said shortly.

I wasn't going to speak to him in that mood, so I didn't reply. I waited until he'd given the phone back to the bartender, who said "Hello?"

"Hello," I said. "Tell that creep I'm not going to talk to him if he uses that tone of voice to me!"

Again I waited. There was silence at the other end, or maybe a few distant shouts, I wasn't sure. Finally Peter found his reason and came back and said, "Hello, this is Peter Noble. Who is this, please?"

He was being very tiresome. I told him so and told him to come home at once, I was waiting for him outside his door. To avoid argument, I hung up, although it occurred to me that since Peter didn't have a phone outside his door, he might have thought the call was phony. But I guess he doesn't pack much gear mentally, because within a few minutes he came huffing and puffing up the stairs. I was waiting for him in the hallway, having left the hippies to their big surprise-to-come.

Peter's big surprise was catching my duds. He gasped, flung open his door and pushed me aside. Delilah-like, I fell voluptuously onto a couch and lay there breathing heavily. He panted over me, arms akimbo, looking very Great White Hunter.

"You shouldn't treat me so roughly," I murmured. "Not when I'm high, anyway."

His face changed: he smiled; he chuckled. In Scientological terms, I'd say I'd pressed the right button.

"Aha!" He took off his jacket. "Oho!" His tie. "He-hee!" His shoes. Sitting down at his desk, he took a pipe out of a sewing basket and lit up. He didn't look at me, or even offer me a drag. He just puffed, in grim earnest. Within two minutes, he sighed and melted all over his chair. His head lolled around to look at me. I grabbed his eyes and held them. We both burst out laughing.

Well, that made it great. We had a few joints to-

gether, and it ended up with me in the kitchen, making cocoa. I put five Nembutals into his cup and he drank it without noticing. Those Nembutals are fabulous; he was dozy within ten minutes. I hurried him by pretending to doze off with him, Peter being generally slow in everything. When he was finally dead-o, I took my scissors out of my bolero pocket and carefully gave him a tonsure. As I snipped away I wondered whether he'd choose to cut the rest of it off when he saw it, or go around looking like a monk for a couple of months.

It was only when I had finished cutting and was standing back admiring him—he looked El Grecoish—that I realized my cleverness had also landed me with a problem. In getting him asleep so I could cut his hair, I had put to sleep the man I wanted to shock into confessing Rocco Sabine's murder—a shock which would come only when he awoke and saw himself. That could be days from now. Naturally, I couldn't wait that long, but how the devil could I get someone sleeping on Nembutal awake in a hurry? That was tough.

At first I tried gentle methods, like shaking him, slapping his face and sticking things in his ears. Then I tried prying his eyes open, but they kept falling shut again. Finally I used water. That did it.

He spluttered awake.

"What?" I said, hitting him a few times on the back.

He soon found his voice. He wanted to know what I thought I was doing. I told him I was just trying to wake him. I'd cut his hair and I wanted him to see it.

He stared at me unbelievably, so I went into his bathroom and brought out a mirror.

"Here!" I told him. "Look!"

A few days later, I called Peter to see what he had decided to do about his hair. The operator informed me that his number was disconnected, which was a shock that took me two joints to recover from. Then, rocking gently in my hammock, I called his landlord, who told me that Peter had given up his apartment. No, he hadn't left a forwarding address.

I was worried, right through the pot. Peter was my only link and the chief suspect in what I had begun to call for myself the Rocco Sabine Case—only half humorously. I didn't care about my personal safety, in spite of the fact that he had gone berserk last time we met and tried to kill me. (I escaped only after hitting him with a mirror.) But if Rocco Sabine had really been murdered, I was determined to bring the culprit to justice. And Peter's hasty disappearance made him look more than ever like the guilty man.

I spent the next couple of days calling moving agencies. Eventually I found one that admitted handling Peter's moving. He'd had his furniture stored in a downtown warehouse.

At the warehouse, they gave me his address as Sloane House YMCA, on Thirty-fourth Street.

I made my plans.

Two weeks later I registered at Sloane House, asking to be put on the same floor as my friend Peter Noble. They were very obliging about that.

That night I waited in the shower room for him to appear. Although he'd seen me nude before, at Miss B.'s orgy, I knew he'd never recognize me in my Greek boy wig, new muttonchops and moustache, and brown contact lenses.

An old pervert kept hanging around me in the showers, a fat beast of prey. It made me sick to look at him, and I finally managed to slip my soap under

his feet so that he fell to the floor with a thud that almost cracked the tiles.

I stared down at him coldly. He caught my eye and hastily pushed himself slithering over the floor to the far wall.

"What did you do that for?" He was almost blubbing. "I wasn't doing anything to you!"

"You were having me."

That shut him up. Dripping water and tears, he shuffled out and left me in peace.

About midnight, I decided that Peter was obviously going to go dirty for a day, so I went back to my room. I knew which door was his, and, as I passed, I saw his light was off. I wondered whether he was in or not: if not, I'd seize the chance to sneak into his room and search for clues to support my suspicions. I tapped on his door and scooted around the corner. No one answered.

I knew he shared a fire escape with the room next door, where a light was still on. I took my trusty soap back to my room; then, still clad in my towel (on the theory that no one answering a door can be frightened of a man wearing only a towel), I knocked on his neighbor's door.

A young kid answered, a boy with lots of curly hair.

"I've lost my way," I told him.

"Oh?" he said carefully.

"And I was wondering if I could come in a minute and rest."

He just looked at me.

"Oh, I'm not mad or queer or anything," I told him quickly. "You needn't fear for your body."

"What's your room number?" he asked.

"That's why I'm lost, I can't remember. And I acci-

dentally left my key on my bed. I guess I'll have to call them up downstairs if I can use your phone."

He was convinced. He opened his door wider and I went inside.

On his table he had a copy of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *On the Nature of Man*. I picked it up.

"Oh!" I said. "I know what *he's* talking about. I'm an example of the New Man myself. That's what Scientology does for you. In case you don't know, Scientology is a system of mental processing, based on the premise that the mind has an anatomy, like the body, which, after it has been personally explored and mapped, can be made to yield its treasures—like colonizing a new country. I'm only a Grade Four release myself, and there are seven grades to clear, but God knows I've already seen the difference in my life. I mean, compared to what I *used* to be like! Now I don't get hung up any more! It's rather like that commercial on TV for motorists that advises you to watch out for the other driver. Life, I mean. Accepting one's own awareness as stability means recognizing the aberrations of others, and you stop reacting to them. So you avoid accumulating other hangups, you see? That's how Scientology can change your life—if you want it changed, of course. Many don't, with which there is nothing wrong; it's a question of choice. Let me give you an example. Before my Grade Four release, I used to get unhappy if anyone was to say something particularly mean to me, like 'You're crazy.' Now that doesn't bother me at all. I recognize that my presence is merely triggering off an engram—a moment of previous pain in their life—that keeps bothering them in various situations. It has nothing to do with me, really. So I'm able to smile in the face of their

hostility and say something noncommittal, like 'Oh really?' That usually quiets them down. Either their hostility goes away or they do."

I put down the book and opened his window.

"What—"

"All of which," I continued, "brings me to the point that what Scientology does to a person is to make a mutation of him. Of course, Teilhard de Chardin says that such an evolution is the next step for man, but I personally feel that this step has already been arrived at by some people. Even psychologists recognize it, though they, as is their wont, have given it a name that only reflects psychology's fixation on sick minds: they call such people psychopaths."

I jumped up onto the windowsill.

"Here," said the kid, "what are you doing?"

"Just getting a breath of air." I climbed out onto the fire escape. Peter's window was dark.

"Wait a minute," said the kid, coming to the window. He sounded alarmed. I ignored him, and tried Peter's window. It was locked.

"Hey," said the kid. "Stop that! Do you want me to call someone?"

"Cool it," I told him. "I think this is my room."

"It can't be," he said. He climbed out behind me and grabbed my arm. "Please."

I shook him off. "Mind your own business," I told him sharply. His grip tightened around my arm again.

"Will you cut that out?" I hissed. Fending him off with one arm, I tugged my towel loose, swung it around my elbow and carefully knocked Peter's window in. It made a much louder noise than I expected, and a light immediately went on inside the room.

Shocked, I wrenched myself free from the kid and bounded up the fire escape. The kid looked up at me, then turned to Peter's window as it opened. Peter must have seen the kid illumined in the dark and it scared him. He yelped and gave the boy a mighty shove. Caught off balance, the kid tipped neatly over the rail of the fire escape. He didn't make a sound all the way down, probably from sheer surprise.

Peter slammed his window shut and his light went off.

I was horrified, seeing murder committed before my very eyes. My heart hardened. "I'll get this bastard," I swore to myself, "if it's the last thing I do!"

Slowly I climbed to the roof, and found an internal staircase that I followed to my floor. There I unearthed my key from the sand ashtray outside the elevator and went to my room. I didn't sleep well that night.

In the morning no one mentioned the boy's death to me at the YMCA. I bought a paper and scanned it carefully. On an inside page, near the bottom of a column, was the report of another suicide at Sloane House.

Peter had gotten away with it again.

I was running short of cash. I'd put a time limit on the use I'd make of Peter's credit card, realizing that he'd need all his resources for future legal fees. There seemed to be no way out but Welfare.

The initial interviews were stiff, but they soon shunted me off to a private office with a man they said would ask me a few personal questions, then make out a report that would govern their decision. He turned out to be a psychiatrist, to my relief.

He looked at my papers and said, "Apparently you're claiming welfare on the grounds that you're a whore who has grown too old to work."

I nodded.

He chuckled. "Are you serious?"

I shrugged. "I'm broke."

"So why don't you get a job?"

"I've tried," I told him. "I'm too old. I'm unattractive. They want bright young things. My day is done."

"I don't mean that," he said. "I mean why don't you get an ordinary job like everyone else? Do you have any skills?"

I leered at him and he blushed and wrote something down.

"We can put you in touch with a training organization," he began, and stopped abruptly as I exposed myself.

"You see that?" I said sternly. "That's my career. That's my livelihood. That's my *training*! I don't want a new profession, I want to work in the field I've chosen, the field I'm an acknowledged expert in. You get me work like that and I'll sing your praises high and wide. But don't give me a line about 'training organizations!' I dragged myself up by my jockstrap, and now you're telling me to forget it all, start again!"

"Put that thing away," he said, rather pale.

Pretending to grumble, I tidied myself up.

"I daresay," he went on, "that you are all the things you claim. But if the world doesn't appreciate it, don't you think that for your own good you should find something that, er, would be appreciated?"

"Like?"

"Like, er . . ." He consulted some papers. "Well, have you ever worked in an office?"

"That's where my career began," I told him. "Jerking off a French translator at the U.N. On the fifteenth floor."

He gulped. "Well, how about a factory?"

I smiled slowly. "Yes, I remember a time—"

"Okay!" He put up a hand to silence me and wrote busily for a few moments.

"Have you ever had a nervous breakdown? Or a mental illness of any kind?"

"Not that you or your buddies might know about."

He gave me a hard look and wrote again.

"Ever been inside a mental home?"

I nodded.

"Well? Would you like to tell me about it?"

"There was this faggy psychiatrist," I said.

"Okay." He signed the papers and told me to deliver them to another office.

"You know," he added, "I could have arrested you for what you just did?"

"I need food and shelter," I told him. "If you think putting me in a training school for criminals will provide that, go ahead. I've got nothing left to lose."

He waved me out of his office.

They turned me down.

Without cash, a man grows desperate, which is what forced me to a rather ignoble move. I had no other excuse.

I went to the funeral parlor on Bleecker Street and asked them for a list of their rates. They had them printed on a neat little card, which I pocketed. Then I asked them to draw me a map that would get me to the Empire State Building. I offered them my pencil

for the drawing, which was made, to my satisfaction, on a sheet of their notepaper embossed with the name and address of the company.

At home, I carefully erased the pencil marks. I called up *The New York Times* and put in an ordinary notice announcing Peter's death. It was published the following day. I cut it out, ringed a pricing on the price-list card, typed a bill for services rendered on the notepaper, and sent this information to Peter's parents in Tucson, enclosing my phone number and writing them a consolatory letter as Peter's oldest friend. In the letter, I wrote that their son's death had been accidental, a combination of drugs and alcohol, and that the doctor's certificate would be inside the coffin, which I was having shipped to them. Unfortunately, I had been forced to shoulder the expenses, not having been able to locate their address in Peter's effects until today. I would send the rest of his belongings either C.O.D. or as soon as I could afford it, whichever they preferred.

They called me when they received the letter. His father, rather choked, thanked me for my help. He said they just couldn't believe the news at first, but after trying to get Peter on the phone (which was disconnected), or through his landlord (he had vacated his apartment), they had been forced to swallow the bad news. I was thanked thoroughly for what I had done, invited to Tucson any time, and promised that a check was already in the mail to cover my expenses.

It arrived two days later. I was solvent again!

As you may have observed from the story about Rocco and Harry in Mexico, Rocco had a strangely unpredictable, almost evil side to his nature. This I found fascinating, as though, perhaps, through him

my own need for evil was relieved. But in all the tales I've gathered about him, I've noticed that the ones concerning his childhood seem to lack this evil bent. Somewhere in his life, perhaps it was merely adulthood, something happened to change him, to transmute innocence into knowledge, good into evil.

The following tale concerns itself with the days when Rocco had not quite come to this turning point in his life.

It was Save Our Soldiers Week on Guernsey, as well as everywhere else in the British Isles. Rocco, seven years old, was seized by the same desire to help that careful propaganda had initiated in everyone who could read and wasn't deaf. But his problem was different from most people's. What could a kid of seven do to Save Our Soldiers? He couldn't give cash, as most people did. He couldn't volunteer for anything—they would have laughed at him, and he knew it. And he couldn't knit scarves and balaclavas and socks, because he couldn't knit.

He hung around the Church Hall, where a bazaar was going to be held to culminate the church's activities in Save Our Soldiers Week. Bad-minded spinsters and married ladies, who included his own mother, shooed him away. It seemed to Rocco that a seven-year-old wasn't even considered human by grownups.

Fed up, he turned his back on the whole thing. He went down to the headland and watched the light blinking on the lightship moored off the island's coast. There were gulls clustered around something on the narrow beach below. He began throwing stones at them. They were so interested in what they'd found that even when a stone landed right in their midst they just rose a couple of feet off the sand, then settled back down again. Rocco wondered what

it was they were feasting on, and ran down the steep muddy path to the beach to find out. The gulls didn't appreciate his arrival. They sent up angry squawks, turning their beady eyes on him in cold menace. He threw another pebble at them, and several of them took off and flew around his head, diving at him and screeching.

A wink was as good as a nod to Rocco. He took to his heels, finding shelter in a nook among the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. From there he could watch the gulls safely.

After a while, he realized the birds were eating a drowned man. He watched, fascinated. Then he heard a groan. His heart almost stopped; the hair rose on the back of his neck.

But the groan, when it came again, didn't come from the body on the beach. It came from somewhere near Rocco in the rocks.

He scrambled around looking, and found the man lying under a projecting stratum of rock in the cliff face that made a kind of shallow cave above the tide-mark. Rocco approached cautiously. The man was lying on his back, apparently unable to move, except for his right hand, which was beating on the sand. He was a flyer: Rocco recognized his leather helmet with the earphone pockets. At home he had one just like it that he was waiting to grow into. The man looked toward Rocco, but didn't seem to see him. He groaned again and said something which Rocco knew was in German, from the radio programs he had heard.

Rocco stepped back, sat down and thought about what he should do.

He thought of everything. Finally he decided to save the soldier because it was Save Our Soldiers Week. When he made up his mind he felt a thrill of

illicit excitement, because the man wasn't one of "Our Soldiers." He was a German, an enemy. It was Rocco's first consciously treacherous act.

He ran back to his home, a small cottage on the nearest outskirts of the village. His mother was still down at the church, so the house was empty. (Rocco's father was sent to London to work in a munitions factory during the war.) Rocco went into the pantry and took a tiny piece of various foods that didn't need to be cooked. He cut a smidgeon of cheese, filched two of his mother's homemade pickled onions, added the rind from three pieces of bacon, cut two slices of bread, mixed-cocoa powder, powdered milk and sugar in a paper screw, and poured some milk into a tin mug, which he covered with waxed paper. He packed all these things into his school satchel and hurried back down to the beach.

The airman was lying as he had left him, except that he seemed to be asleep. Rocco tried to wake him, but couldn't. He poured a little milk down the man's throat. It ran all over his chin and neck, and he woke up. At least, he opened his eyes; but he obviously still didn't see Rocco, or know where he was, or what was happening to him.

Rocco pushed a pickled onion into his mouth. It just stayed there, resting between the teeth. Rocco took the man's head between his hands and worked the lower jaw up and down, to show the man how to chew. After a while, the man's jaws began working of their own accord. Rocco poured a little milk into his mouth to help him swallow the onion. Then he tipped some of the cocoa powder and sugar on top of that.

The man vomited. A sea of blood and mucus and water and bits of food flowed over his face and chest.

Rocco was revolted, and leaped away. He couldn't even bear to look at the vomit, and turned his back on the airman to sit facing the sea while he pondered on what to do next.

He ran back to his house, went up to the attic and found a rubber groundsheet and an eiderdown. He ran back to the beach with them. The airman was unconscious again, rather to Rocco's relief. He threw handfuls of water from pools in the rocks onto the airman's body, to wash off the vomit. When the zip of his flying suit was clear, Rocco gingerly undid it. He spread the rubber groundsheet flat on the sand and turned the airman over onto it, grabbing his flying suit at the back so that the man fell out of it as he rolled. Rocco took off the man's boots and pulled the flying suit free. He put the eiderdown over the body, conscientiously tucking in the corners as his mother did when she put him to bed at night. The man remained unconscious, lying on his belly.

Rocco sat back, looking at him. He got down on his knees and said The Lord's Prayer. He arranged the rest of the food he had brought so that the man would see it when he opened his eyes, then leaned over and kissed the back of his head. It was getting toward twilight, and Rocco had to go home before his mother missed him. "Goodnight Godbless" he muttered, then stood up and ran home.

The next day was a Saturday. Rocco had to go to the grocer and the butcher and the greengrocer before he was free. It was already noon by the time he got to the beach. In his pockets he had some fruit and a whole week's ration of cheese for an adult and a child, one and a half ounces. (He'd lied steadfastly to his mother when she asked him where the cheese was when he came home from the grocer. He said he didn't know.)

The airman was lying on his back again, the eider-down twisted around his legs. Rocco was thrilled. He'd been afraid he'd find the man dead, but this evidence of activity meant, perhaps, that he was recovering.

He knelt down beside the man and lifted his head.

"Are you awake?" he asked.

The airman opened his eyes, a clear blue, and looked directly at Rocco. He didn't seem to be afraid, or hurting, or puzzled; he just looked. Rocco was delighted. He smiled and showed the man the food he had brought. The food he'd left the day before was gone, but Rocco suspected that it was the gulls that had eaten it.

He offered the airman an apple. The man's eyes followed the red orb without interest. Rocco tried to encourage his appetite. "Mmmmm!" he said gloatingly, looking at the apple. He polished it on his jersey. "Mmmmm!" He glanced at the airman to see if he was still watching. He was, but still didn't show any interest. Rocco decided to take a bite himself: that always worked with his dog. He bit into the apple, and, sure enough, the airman's eyes changed expression. His mouth opened with difficulty, as though it pained him to move it.

Rocco, recently a survivor of the school dentist, recognized the airman's problem. Kindly he took the chewed apple out of his own mouth and stuffed it into the airman's. The airman closed his eyes and Rocco watched his Adam's apple bolt up and down as he tried to swallow. Finally the fruit went down, and the airman opened his eyes again. This time he really seemed to see Rocco, and lifted his hand. Scared half to death, Rocco leaped up and put his foot down firmly on the man's forearm, anchoring

it to the ground. The airman winced, and Rocco, immediately sorry, stepped away.

Patiently Rocco fed the man the rest of the food, chewing it all first for him. When he was done, he went home to get a cup of milk. He was proud of all the running around the airman was causing him: it seemed to be a measure of his own kindness.

Sneaking a cup of milk from under his mother's nose, Rocco noticed a copy of *Picture Post* and slid it under his jersey. He thought the airman would probably appreciate something to look at, even if he couldn't read the English words. He stopped on the top of the headland and tactfully tore out all the war photos from the magazine. It didn't leave much to look at, and Rocco resolved to find something better next time.

The airman was still awake, and turned his head to watch Rocco's approach. He said something in German, which Rocco ignored. Sitting down, he lifted the man's head onto his lap and helped him drink the milk. Then, propping the magazine on the man's chest, he began showing him the pictures. After a while, the airman looked up at him and smiled. Rocco felt marvelously happy.

Soon the airman's eyes closed, and Rocco gently stood up and went home.

The next day, after Sunday school in the morning, Ralph Coleman and his gang had a charge against the St. Pierre boys, who lived on the other side of the river. To Rocco's dismay, the St. Pierre boys kept retreating under a barrage of rocks and turf and arrows and slingshots until they were marooned on the top of the headland. Rocco couldn't get by them to visit his airman without incurring their curiosity (and probably getting hit by a few rocks as well). His pockets loaded with supplies, and yesterday's

newspaper under his arm, Rocco sat down behind a large rock and waited. The cozy afternoon sun sent him into a doze; when he woke up, the kids had gone. By the sun, the time was mid-afternoon. Rocco knew he'd catch it from his mother for not going home to dinner. He decided to hurry down with the supplies and then run straight home.

As he drew near the airman, he realized that something had happened. The ground was littered by a new outcrop of rocks and stones. A dread filled him. He walked slowly up to the airman's body. It was battered and bloody, and its head was crushed by a large stone.

I never answer knocks on my door, but the cop was waiting for me outside it.

"Are you Shelley Skull?"

"No," I said instinctively. I smiled and added, "I'm his roommate, Rocco Sabine."

"Is Shelley Skull in?"

"No."

"Can you prove who you are?"

I looked at him blankly.

"Let me see your identification, please."

"I don't carry any." I thought a moment. "But if you'd like to come inside, I'll find something . . ."

He nodded. I took out my key, opened the door and stood politely aside. He walked in, and I slammed the door shut again. Bracing a foot against the wall, I hung on to the doorknob.

"Hey!" His yell of surprise was muffled. I felt the knob turn in my hands. He pounded on the door.

"Hey! Open this door!"

Ignoring him, I hung on. He started tugging from the other side. He was a great big guy, and I didn't know how long I could hold him. The door opened a

crack. I exerted myself and managed to close it again. A few seconds later, he got it open an inch. Scared, I let go.

There was a chest of drawers with a very sharp corner just behind the door. I guess he caught that in the small of the back. I didn't stay to find out; I beat it down the stairs, and no one came pounding after me.

This was serious. I walked the streets, wondering what to do. I'd just been going out for some orris root to clean my wigs and only had a few dollars on me. Everything I owned was now in the hands of the cops.

After a couple of hours, I ventured back. The apartment was sealed with a couple of wooden strips nailed across the door, but there were no cops in sight. I tore off the wood, went inside and packed a couple of bags. I used my shoe to hammer the wood back in place on the door frame when I left.

On Eighth Street I registered at a cheap hotel, took my bags to my room, then went to visit Peter Noble's ex-landlord. Yes, he said, he did have an apartment available on Macdougall. I signed the lease and gave him a check.

The next morning I moved in. Convinced it was Peter who had put the cops onto me, I counted on his never thinking of his old pad as my new hideout. But, just to be safe, I left his name on the mailbox. I didn't worry about bumping into any of the shorn hippies next door: I knew they'd never recognize me out of drag.

Peter had left a few packing cases around, soap powders, buckets, sponges, that kind of stuff. For a charlady the place would have been semi-furnished. I hung up my hammock and tried to feel at home.

As the night wore on I grew increasingly depressed, and drank my way through a bottle of Bristol Cream without enthusiasm. I was stymied in my investigation of Rocco Sabine; Peter Noble had disappeared from the Y; the cops were after me; and who the hell was that fat man I kept running into?

PART 2

I had a blank spot for a couple of days. They're very interesting, I've had them before. Nothing serious, you just find yourself somewhere you'd never expect to be, usually doing something crazy.⁷

Like I came to on a train, somewhere in the middle of America. I was heading for Tucson, hoping that Peter Noble's parents would be waiting for me at the station.

The strange thing about my blank spots was, I could often remember exactly what I'd done in them. This one dated back to the night I'd gotten drunk in Peter's apartment. In the loneliness of my Navy hammock, I suffered a kind of vision that screwed me up for the next three days. I thought of his parents, how they must be suffering, waiting for a train to bring their son's body to them, a train and a body that would never arrive. They were probably frantic by now, meeting every train, calling up the Lost and Found. What normally would have made

⁷ "Time is a great healer." Actually it is the greatest, and curative medicine will eventually concern itself with methods of lengthening or shortening time according to a patient's need.

me rock with laughter now made me groan with sorrow instead.

In my nuttiness, I figured there was only one thing to do. I had to let them off the hook, even if it meant my own neck. I had to tell them that Peter was still alive (so far as I knew), and that I had swindled them. If they chose to prosecute, well, they were entitled. Maybe I deserved it. But if they chose to forgive! How beautiful that would be! As beautiful, perhaps, as the spirit moving my own confession.

At such times, I'm too saintly to be sensible.

So I had taken the first train out, sending the Nobles a telegram when to expect me. I was two days to Tucson before I came back to my senses. Tucson! Peter Noble's parents! Forget and forgive! What was I *thinking* of!

I realized I'd just emerged from a spot of madness. What could I do to straighten things out? We were due to arrive in a few hours. Of all the alternatives, I decided to go ahead with the plan I had already ingenuously set up: to meet with the Nobles, tell them the truth (or at least part of it), and hope for their forgiveness. If they gave it—and they'd have to be inhuman, I thought, not to—I might swing them round to the point of paying my expenses while I continued to search for Peter, who had been missing since he checked out of the YMCA. After all, when they learned that their son was still alive, surely they'd want to locate him as soon as possible?

Mr. and Mrs. Noble were waiting for me at the station all right—together with Peter and a couple of cops. So this was where he'd been hiding out!

Luckily I spotted them first and ducked behind an o.j. machine. "Forget and forgive!" I sneered at my-

self as I slipped on a Greek-boy wig and white wrap-arounds.

Peter stared at me as I walked by. I gave him a dirty look, which, God knows, he deserved, and kept walking.

Downtown, I registered at the Y and spent an uneventful night there. The next morning I took a taxi past the Nobles' home several times. The house was large, white and rather lavish, on the outskirts of town. When Peter came out to stare at us, I told the cabbie to head back to town.

The cops were already at the Y when I arrived. It was a good thing I had registered as Oliver Brown. It was as Oliver I went to my room, got my bag and checked out.

I sat in the park for a change of pace, getting some sun. They have some sun in Tucson. I took my shirt off, lit up a joint and relaxed.

Although I was being hounded again, things weren't so bad. At least I'd stumbled across Peter Noble's secret retreat. I had to admire the way he had manipulated events so that the cops were on his side instead of mine. He was a cunning adversary all right, beginning to seem worthy of his place in Rocco Sabine's life. A tough cooky to put away!

Then the Gestapo found me, with a boot in my side, my shirt flung in my face, me yanked painfully up by my arm, cuffed on the back of the head, dragged to a police car, shoved inside and driven to a police station.

In England, I'm told, a group of Clears was taken from the Scientology college at Sainthill to a local police station, where their utter calm and superior demeanor made the cops think they were all drugged.

I was glad I remembered that. The only thing I

had to fear was violence itself, and that was easily avoided by charm.

"Do any of you boys have a cigarette?" I asked pleasantly as the car set off.

The two cops flanking me ignored me, but the one next to the driver took a pack out of his shirt pocket and offered me one over his shoulder.

"Oh, goody, menthol," I noted. "Light, please?"

"What did you use to light your Mary Jane?" snickered the cop on my right.

I smiled at him.

The cop in the front seat gave me a match.

"Haven't you fellows ever tried Mary Jane?" I asked, deliberately using the local patois.

They all blushed except the driver.

"Is there much smoked in Tucson?" I continued.

"Oh, there's a—" one of them began.

"Frank!" came a warning voice from the driver. Frank shut up.

"My name is Shelley Skull," I told them, to break the silence.

"We know!" snickered the one who snickered.

"What kind of a name is that?" asked Frank.

"Where're you from, anyways?"

"England."

"One of them mockers, huh?"

I shrugged.

"You a citizen?" the driver asked.

"Yes." I am a British citizen.

At the station I was escorted up the steps and into the hall by the four of them. The desk sergeant wasn't as easy to reach as his patrolmen; he didn't even look at me at first. But I answered his questions without hesitation, improvising where necessary, and by the time we were through I could tell I'd gotten him interested.

"Take him away!" he told the cops.

Frank led me through a door and down a flight of steps to a corridor of cells, very cool and painted in pastels. He chose to put me in one already occupied.

"Hey, you want to watch out for this one," he chortled, opening the door. "He's a sex maniac!"

He was referring to my cellmate, a monstrous truckdriver type, hairy and weird-looking like Moon-dog, but clad in levis instead of blankets. I shuddered as the door clanged behind me. Frank chuckled. He pulled up a chair and sat outside the cell door, presumably to watch the action. After a while I asked him if he didn't have anything better to do, and he said no, this was his lunch hour.

Nothing happened, of course, even after Frank gave up and went back on duty.

The next morning Peter and his parents came to see me. Clearly embarrassed, he didn't even take his Stetson off.

"Er, Shelley," he said awkwardly, "these are my parents."

I shoved my hand through the bars. "How do you do?" I cried happily. "I'm delighted to meet you, Peter has told me so much about you!"

Mrs. Noble, a pretty blond lady, fluttered and gave me her hand.

"What did Peter say your name was?" I asked her.

"Why . . . Myrna," she said faintly.

"Myrna!" I gave her a once-over, then turned to Peter's father.

"Sir!" I came to attention. Mr. Noble, caught off guard, bobbed a half-bow.

"And Peter! You old devil!" Peter blushed, and I laughed at him. "How nice of you all to come and visit me! So soon, too! I was only picked up yester-

day! However did you know?" I had given the desk sergeant their address. "But please!" I cut off Peter's explanation with a raised hand. "Before you say anything . . ." I got down on my knees. My cellmate gave a dirty laugh, which I ignored. "I must beg the forgiveness of all three of you, particularly you, sir, and you, madam, for the scurvy trick I played upon you. Peter knows, however, how desperate I must have been. You see, I was totally penniless, a stranger to your shores, without a job or a friend to turn to. Peter had disappeared, I tried to get work, I tried Welfare, I even tried begging in the streets. No good. Normally I can make out, but this time nothing happened, I couldn't make a buck spin my way. And without cash, as maybe you know, a man grows desperate."

I hung my head. There was an awkward silence.

"But I was on my way," I cried, a holy light emanating from my face as I lifted my head, "to confess my sins to you. I was going to throw myself on your mercy, hoping you would understand, the way that Peter said you always understood his peccadillos. That's the only reason I came to Tucson. I swear it on a stack of Bibles. I was coming to ask your forgiveness, as I do now."

My head drooped again. They were all terribly embarrassed. I could hear them breathing. Peter shuffled his feet. "Get up, Shell, for God's sake!" he muttered.

"No!" I cried, my voice cracking with emotion. "Not until you say you forgive me! Do you? Do you forgive me?"

There was such a long silence, my faith in human nature almost wavered. But it was saved by the intervention of Myrna Noble, a lovely woman.

"We . . . forgive you," she breathed. I looked slowly up into her eyes and smiled.

"Thank you. Now do with me what you will."

"We forgive you," growled a hostile voice, which came unexpectedly from Peter's father, "as soon as you give us back the money you extorted!"

Mrs. Noble's ears were as sensitive as my own.

"Bill!" she said reprovingly. "Not 'extorted,' please!"

"No," I said quickly. "More like . . ." I hesitated.

"Borrowed?" the lady suggested.

"Borrowed!" Seizing the word joyously, I thanked her with a grin. She smiled back.

I turned to Peter's father and tried to match his businesslike mood. "Sir," I said sternly, "we will both make my life intolerable until I do pay it back!"

He stared at me. I stared back. He grew red. My TRs fully established, I watched him with interest. He grew redder and redder, and his eyeballs started to bulge. Stubbornly, he refused to give up.

"Heavens!" broke in his wife, with a nervous laugh. "What are you two up to?"

I glanced at her. "Oh, we're just getting acquainted," I said, and turned the full blast back on her husband. "Aren't we?" Slowly I smiled at him.

He couldn't stand it. He burst into laughter, throwing his arm around Peter's neck and hugging him crazily. "You got some friends, kid!" he cried. Mrs. Noble and I laughed with them.

They bailed me out and we all went home.

"Just leave my mother alone!" snapped Peter. "And my father too!" he added, after a moment's thought. He was standing at the foot of my bed. It was the middle of the night when he decided to come

into my room and issue this interesting warning. I was flattered on both counts.

"Have you spoken to your mother about this?" I asked, curious.

He got angry. "Certainly not!"

After he left, I thought about his warning. It opened up new vistas.

The next day, Mr. Noble went off to his office chuckling after a merry breakfast with me. A big wheel locally (Mr. Pepsi), he pulled a few strings and got me cleared with the cops.

I was thanking Myrna in the rose garden as she cut blooms when Peter came charging across the lawn like an enraged bull. He stayed close by me for the rest of the day. By dinnertime he'd begun to bore me. When at last he went to take a shower, I hid all of his and his father's hats; apparently, he wouldn't be seen in public nowadays without a hat. I counted on at least half an hour's privacy while he hunted for them. A man needs to be alone now and then.

Myrna was in the kitchen. Her husband was tuned in to the TV in the den.

"Oh!" she cried at my entrance.

I smiled.

"Where's Peter?"

"In the shower," I told her brutally. She quivered with embarrassment.

"Can I help you?" I suggested. She lowered her eyes. "Well, you can't lay the table," she said cutely, "because it's already been done."

I roared. So did she, after a moment's shyness.

There was a sudden banging and thumping upstairs. Peter yelled angrily, "Shelley!"

Quickly I told Myrna, "I need money." I blew her a kiss, then trudged upstairs to dance attendance on her son.

We men had drinks together before dinner. Myrna stayed out in the kitchen, ear against the door as revealed by her shadow under it.

Peter's father was easy to amuse. I quickly summed him up as a manic depressive. He laughed at everything I said, but, as events later proved, he was liable to become uncontrollably violent just as easily.

"I understand you work for Miss B.?" I asked him. Peter frowned.

"That's right," said Mr. Noble. "More bounce to the flounce!"

I laughed politely. "I met her in New York."

"Oh yeah?"

"She's mad about me. She's tried to kidnap me twice. I think she digs my genitals."

Mr. Noble roared. Peter smiled, looking rather sick.

"What do you do with a woman like that?" I asked.

"Give in!" cried Mr. Noble. "Pepsi is bigger than both of us, kiddo!"

"If I give in," I suggested, with a glance at Peter, "won't I just become a discard?"

"If what you're asking is whether it's better to be had than sought," said Mr. Noble, "in my opinion, it depends on what you get out of it. For instance, Miss B. might set you up for life, you never know."

"But Peter—" I began.

Peter interrupted. "Need we be so sordid? After all . . ." He indicated his mother in the kitchen.

Mr. Noble harumphed, glancing guiltily over his shoulder, revealing words to me.

"Oh!" I said. "So you also—"

He harumphed again, jumping up and grabbing my glass. "How about another drinkiepoo?" he said loudly, and went over to the bar.

Peter whispered to me, "Cool it, for Christ's sake!" I grinned at him. When his father brought the booze back, I said chattily, "Mr. Noble, did Peter ever mention anyone by the name of Rocco Sabine to you?"

"No," said Mr. Noble, clearly glad to change the conversation. "Why? Who's he?"

"He was a murderer," I said. "I'm researching his life. I might do a book on him."

"A murderer!" gasped Peter. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, didn't you know? Yes, Rocco killed. Or at least he was convinced that he had."

"I was in the war," said Mr. Noble, closing his eyes dramatically, "and let me tell you—"

Nobody wanted to hear any tired old war experiences.

"It was an undeniable feeling of guilt," I continued, "that first convinced Rocco he was a murderer. He searched his memories, which were a rather patchy collection, and could remember several occasions when he might have killed, and several on which someone had killed and it could have been him. But it took a long time for him to realize that the feelings of guilt he carried were too deeply embedded to have been sustained in this life."

There was a silence.

"What do you mean?" asked Peter.

"I mean that Rocco realized he was feeling guilty for the murder or murders he had accomplished in full consciousness *some other time!*"

Mr. Noble stirred uncomfortably. "Yes, well—" he began.

"Hush, Dad," said Peter. He turned to me. "Do you

know what you're talking about?" he demanded flatly.

"Oh yes," I said. "Do you?"

"Frankly, no," he said.

I couldn't resist teasing him a little further. "You were never in any war, of course?"

"No."

"And you never killed, then?"

"Of course not."

"Really?" I smiled significantly, projecting his murder of the kid at the YMCA. He turned pale. Instead of replying, he stood up abruptly and walked into the kitchen.

"Peter?" cried his father. Peter kept going, out the back door, into the garden. Mr. Noble looked annoyed.

"What have you done now?" he snapped.

I shrugged. "Is it really a question of what I have done?"

Mr. Noble strode out into the garden after his son. I tiptoed into the kitchen. Myrna was staring out of the window at her family. I stood behind her silently for a moment: Peter was sitting pensively in a tree swing, not looking at his father, who was standing nearby, talking, stubbing his toe against the turf.

I pinched Myrna's behind. She gasped and leaped aside.

"In Italy," I told her softly, "you'd be black and blue."

"Touch me again and you'll be black and blue," she cried fiercely. I chuckled. I like a woman with spirit.

"How did a girl like you ever give birth to a namby-pamby like that?" I asked her, nodding through the window at Peter.

Furious, she swung at me with her right palm. I

caught her wrist and pulled her into my arms, feeling her breasts flatten against my chest like two over-ripe tomatoes.

"Let me go!" she cried. "I'll call my husband!"

I laughed. "Allow me." Keeping a firm hold of her, I leaned over and banged on the window. Both Mr. Noble and Peter turned to look. I kissed Myrna savagely before their astounded gaze. She squirmed in my embrace at first, but by the time her two men came bounding into the kitchen she had relaxed and was beginning to dig it, as my hands roamed freely over her body.

They tore me off and piled into me. Mr. Noble was really mad, and by the time I hit the floor Peter had come back to his senses and was pulling his father away.

"Throw him out!" roared Mr. Noble. They all three dragged me out of the front door, across the garden, and flung me into the bushes of an empty lot.

I lay there for quite a while, exhausted. Slowly the sky grew dark and the stars came out. Insects crawled over me, but I couldn't move. I wondered if I was badly hurt.

Peter came creeping out of the house. "Shelley?" he called. I made a noise. He came to me, and, kneeling by my side, he lifted my head.

"Oh, Shell!" To my surprise, he was crying. Hot tears fell onto my face, creating a sudden flux of emotion within me that broke me up. I wept with him. He crushed me against his chest, and we sobbed away like reconciled lovers.

With Myrna's help, he bedded me down in the garage for the night. Apparently his old man refused to let me back into the house. Peter said it was all he

could do to even get him to let me sleep in the garage. Myrna, avoiding my eyes, made a bed in the back of the family station wagon, and Peter carried me in his arms from my resting place in the bushes to my new bed.

Myrna slipped some money into my pocket and went back into the house. Peter then kissed me good night. He said he daren't remain alone with me for long, his father might boil over if unwatched.

Car thieves broke into the garage in the middle of the night and drove off with the station wagon, me still inside. They must have thought I was a bundle of old blankets. At first, awakened by the starting of the engine, I was filled with fear, thinking that Mr. Noble had flipped and was going to kill me. But as the car drove out of the garage, I peeked over the back of the front seat and saw two men who were strangers to me. Tentatively, I stretched. A few hours' sleep had worked wonders. Though I ached and felt generally pretty battered, I could still use every muscle in my body. I practiced yoga exercises quietly while I was driven off into the unknown darkness.

The day was dawning when we pulled up at a small isolated airstrip in the depths of the desert. From the conversation of the thieves, I had learned by now that my abduction was no mistake. That, in fact, it wasn't the car they had stolen but me, put onto me by a phone call from Mr. Noble, for some unfathomable reason.

They lifted me out bodily. I pretended to be unconscious and played limp as they sat me in a wheelchair. They wheeled me across the tarmac into a small jet and carried me to a seat inside. Minutes

later, as the engines whistled into a scream, someone plunged an accompanying needle into my arm, and I really became unconscious.

I came to lying naked on a bed in a dark room. Someone was leaning over me, examining my face under the light of a doctor's headband.

I blinked. "Am I ruined for life?" The words didn't come out too clearly.

"What was that?" Someone was on the other side of the room.

Pushing away the man leaning over me, I sat up.

"He's definitely awake," another voice commented. There seemed to be three of them altogether; it was so dark, I couldn't really see.

"Where am I?" I asked. "Who are you?"

"Give him another shot," someone suggested.

"Better not," said the man with the headband.

"He'll recover more quickly if he's mobile."

"Recover?" I was taken aback. What was wrong with me? My body seemed to be all right. *But why were the lights out?*

"What's wrong with me?" I demanded.

There was a single, rather bitter laugh.

"You're going blind."

Instinct told me it was a lie, and I reacted violently, jumping off the bed to the floor. But my legs, weak from my beating and the drug, couldn't support me, and I crumpled to the floor, grabbing the leg of the bed to save myself.

The bed turned out to be on rather large, efficient casters. The sudden yank sent it skidding wildly out of my grasp, crashing into the two men who were sitting on the other side of the room. They screamed, and the man with the headband rushed over to pick them up. His light momentarily illumined the hag-

gard face and scarlet eyes of Thompson Thomas, sunglasses dangling from one ear, who screamed again and flung an arm over his face.

I began crawling in the opposite direction.

"Don't let him get away!" cried the other man, squirming under Thompson Thomas and the tangled furniture.

The man with the headband spun around, using his beam as a searchlight to find me. I flattened to the floor. The light passed over my head, bobbing rapidly around the walls, passing a door en route. I stood up and hurled myself in that direction.

"Get him, quick!"

A hand gripped my shoulder as I tugged the door open. I grabbed it by the wrist, pulled it against the doorjamb, and, leaping outside, I slammed the door on it. There was a sickening crunch and an incredulous scream from inside.

I didn't wait to apologize, but ran down the hallway. I was in Thompson Thomas' town house, as I might have expected. At the far end of the corridor a door opened, and a fat colored maid stepped out. She gave me a honey of a smile and asked, "Are you lookin' foh yoh clothes, suh?"

"I don't have time right now," I said, summoning a smile. "I'll just borrow this, if you don't mind." I tugged down a curtain from the hall window and sped past her. Her eyes popped. "Thanks," I called back from the stairs, draping the curtain around me as I moved.

As I left the house, I caught a glimpse of my face in the hall mirror. It was a battered mess, and the cabbie didn't want to be seen with it. I hopped in at a light before he could protest and snapped, "The Winter Garden Theatre! Ten bucks extra if you get me there for the curtain!"

"Curtain?" he mumbled, reluctantly starting the car. "It's only five o'clock, for Chrissake!"

"A benefit," I told him. "New York Foundlings. How's my makeup?"

He snorted sardonically. "It's terrific."

At the theater, I jumped out and told him to wait, I'd send the stage doorman out to take care of him.

The doorman, straight out of *Sweet Rosie O'Grady*, stared at me in surprise.

"I'm a policeman," I told him sharply. "Is there another exit back here?"

He took his corncob out of his mouth and pointed it down the corridor ahead. "The props . . ." he stammered.

I took off. At the end of the corridor were two big doors. They led outside to a grimy, narrow alleyway. I climbed a fire escape to the roof of the building and settled down thankfully behind a sooty air duct.

Boy, was I glad to be back in Manhattan!

Under cover of night, I walked downtown to Peter's old apartment, loudly chanting the "Hare Krishna Mantra"⁸ to discourage interference. Safely rocking in my Navy hammock again, I tended my cuts and bruises with witch hazel and tried to make some sense out of my recent misfortunes.

It was clear that the whole thing began with my innocent investigation into the life of Rocco Sabine. As soon as I had begun asking questions, I was courted, attacked, drugged, kidnapped and beaten

⁸ *Hare rama rama, hare, hare krishna krishna hare*
Rama rama hare hare, krishna krishna hare hare
Rama krishna rama hare, krishna rama krishna hare . . .

And so on. Since the efficaciousness of the "Mantra" lies not in the meaning of the words, but in their repetition in controlled combinations, I prefer to improvise when I sing it.

up. Peter Noble and Thompson Thomas—Miss B.—were obviously partners. Could it be that Miss B. was using her enormous resources to protect Peter—Harry—after he had murdered Rocco? For what—love? Considering Peter's minimal charms, it didn't seem too likely.

Another answer was that Miss B. might simply be smitten by my own charms. But no one had dug my ass with that kind of fervor since Scientology stopped me shaking it, so that didn't seem the answer, either.

Frankly, I was confused. The only clear fact was that as long as I kept asking questions about Rocco, I was incurring the wrath of Miss B., who was at least as powerful as Satan, if not God.

It was time, I realized, to take the war into the enemy's camp. And, Scientology notwithstanding, there was only one sure way to do that.

I had to wait a week, until my face had healed and I was looking human again. Being broke, I lived on food scrounged from the hippies next door. They shared a fire escape with me and wisely kept their windows unlocked—for immediate egress, I suspect. The dullness of their menu—spaghetti and chicken hearts—was made up for by the amusing quarrels they had about who had eaten what. I wondered where they got their food: they didn't seem to use money. My searches netted me nothing more than a Festival of Britain silver crown, which I guessed wasn't worth its weight in nickel. But they still had a telephone, which I used one morning to call Thompson Thomas at his town house.

"Tell him it's Wonderass," I told his secretary.

He came running.

"Who is this?"

"Wonderass."

"Oh. Do we, er, know each other, Mr. Ass?"

I laughed. "Wonderass is one word," I told him. "My first name is Swell."

He laughed. "Well, Swell, what can I do for you?"

"You can tell me why you've been bugging one Shelley Skull."

The phone went dead for a moment.

"Shell?" Thompson Thomas came back smoothly.

"Swell."

"Okay, Swell. Might I ask why you attacked me and my friends last time we met?"

"Why was I kidnapped?"

"Kidnapped! My dear, you were merely given a lift back to town! Kidnapped, indeed!"

"Cut the crap," I told him. "I need some money."

That calmed him. "What are you prepared to do for it?" he asked.

"What do you want?"

"We can't talk over the phone," he said. "Can I meet you somewhere?"

I laughed at him.

"There must be *some* place," he said.

I thought. "Okay. Rent a tandem and wait for me on the corner of Fifth and Forty-ninth at three o'clock."

"A *tandem*?" he was squealing as I hung up.

I walked out of St. Pat's at one minute to three. There was a small crowd on the corner, ogling Miss B. on her tandem. A *Daily News* car was pulled up nearby, and a photographer was taking shots while a reporter questioned Miss B., who was chic in a purple sweatsuit, sunglasses and blond wig.

I looked at her for a minute from the edge of the crowd, then elbowed my way through.

"Okay, let's go," I said, hopping on the back half of the bike.

The flashbulbs started popping again.

Miss B. twisted in her seat to look at me. "Swell?"

I said, "You don't know me?"

She smiled. "Of course I do, darling. Don't you want to ride up front?"

The reporter said, "Can I have your name, sir?"

"Miss B. said, "His name is Swell Wonderass!"

Those within hearing laughed. I blushed, angry with her. "For Christ's sake!"

She laughed, but gave in. "I'm sorry, we must go," she cried to the reporter and everyone else. "Beep beep!"

Somewhat perilously at first, to the cheers of some of the crowd, we pushed off and merged into the Fifth Avenue traffic.

"Which way?" cried Miss B. over her shoulder.

"Central Park," I told her. "But stay out of Fairyland."

It wasn't much fun pushing those pedals around behind Miss B.'s buns: she didn't care to do much work, and it exhausted me just getting as far as the first bench in the park. We stopped there and sat down. I checked the area to see if any of her hoods had followed us, but we seemed to be clear.

"You need some money," she began, "and I've got lots."

"And what have I got that you want?"

She twinkled. "You'll never guess."

"What about Peter?"

She mused. "He had it once . . . almost."

"What about his father?"

"Who is his father?" she asked in surprise.

"Bill Noble."

"I don't remember."

"Tucson Pepsi?"

She laughed. "Oh yes, of course. Dear man. Yes, he was very good. Very nice man, too."

"Are you talking about sex?" I asked her frankly.

She adjusted her sunglasses and reached into her sweatshirt pocket for a cigarette. "Have a fag, darling," she suggested.

"What about Rocco Sabine?" I went on.

"What about him?"

"Is he dead?"

She smiled. "Surely that's up to you, isn't it, love?"

I tried another tack. "Did you ever meet Rocco?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Alive?"

"Certainly. What kind of a ghoul do you take me for?"

"Why do you try to drug me every time we meet?"

"Drug you?"

"Yes."

She shrugged. "Perhaps it's my crude attempt to seduce you."

"Which brings us back to money."

She smiled complacently.

"Who is Vittorio?" I went on, after a moment's thought.

"I don't know anyone by that name."

"Carlos?"

"I know a Carlos," she admitted. "A film critic."

"Is he very fat and clumsy?"

"No, he's thin and preserved."

"Who's the fat man, then?"

"Oh, you must mean Daniell! He's fat!"

"Why does he keep following me?"

"Darling!" She trilled a laugh. "Whatever makes you think he's following you? Are you paranoid?"

"Slightly."

"Then you should ride in front," she said.

She was cute, there was no getting away from it. She parried my questions like a pro. I was more puzzled than ever. Only one thing was clear: Miss B. wanted me near her. And that, I decided, considering everything, was probably the safest place for me to be.

I moved into her house that night. The fat colored maid was sent to look after me, and chuckled a hearty welcome.

"Ah *thot* we'd be seein moh of you!" she beamed.

"More?" I said coolly, not forgetting our last meeting.

"Did you bring the curtain back, suh?"

"No, I had it made into an African robe for a friend of mine."

She looked at me sharply, then went silently about her business.

I checked out my room, which was large and handsome, with much heavy Spanish furniture. The carpet was Oriental and the drapes were velvet. I dug it, even though I didn't yet know the rent. I'd sat in the lap of luxury before in my time, and always ended up getting shafted. What gave me confidence this time, however, was something Miss B. didn't know about: I was a Grade IV release in Scientology.⁹

That night I met several of Miss B.'s friends, invited to dinner especially for this purpose. We congregated in her bedroom, which was rather like a set for *Camino Real*. Carlos and Vittorio were there, pretending to be a pair of South American dancers named Concho and Conchita. They must have been

⁹ There are seven grades to Clear. I was released on Grade O, Communication; I, Problems; II, Relief; III, Freedom; and IV, Ability. As in my crack about marriage to Carlos, "the best is yet to come."

crazy to think they could fool me with names like that. They both claimed to speak no English, making it easy on themselves. Dr. Ravenal was there, plying the drinks, and that ubiquitous fat man Miss B. called Daniel. Lastly, but definitely not least, there was a young hippie with a mass of curls whose name, Miss B. said with an enigmatic smile, was Harry. The strange thing was, they all pretended not to know me, and, in general, gave pretty good performances. I could see that their plan, whatever it was, was designed to work on all psychological levels. The intensity of the effort again made me wonder what the hell Thompson Thomas was after. Clearly it was more than just my bottom (or whatever). But what? Were they trying to subvert my very mind?

Fortunately, I was high. Before we met, Thompson Thomas had sent the fat maid to my room, sans smile now, with a jug of martinis and a selection of pills. I plumped for a benny for speed, a Dilaudit to make my head shine and a Seconal to cool the whole thing.

Then I met the company.

"Where are you from, Swell?" Dr. Ravenal asked, handing me a martini.

"California."

"Oh, a Beach Bunny, eh?"

I looked at him coldly. "Beach Bunnies are girls." The hippie's try was better.

"I hear you and Miss B. took a trip this afternoon?"

I raised an eyebrow, and he showed me the *Daily News*. There we were, setting off on our tandem surrounded by a smiling crowd. I thought it was an unfortunate photo, angled so that I appeared to be rimming Miss B. It bore a caption, "Pepsi Heiress Rolls It Around."

It made me think.

My original plan, apart from settling my money

problems, had been to ingratiate myself with Miss B. to the point where she trusted me. A few pertinent questions thereafter, I figured, maybe in the form of pillow talk, would unravel the entire mystery of Rocco Sabine. But now I doubted that I could pull this off. Miss B. seemed to have other motives than sex, as I did. I had to change tactics and discover what these were. But in the meantime we each had to keep up the pretense.

I entertained them by telling them a story about Rocco Sabine.

"Rocco wanted to make Magick," I said, "and he knew that glamour was an essential ingredient. He knew that total self-confidence was another. He felt fully equipped, but very ignorant.

"His first experiment was totally intuitive. He mixed his sperm with a cologne by Jean-Marie Farina, and, dabbing it in various strategic nooks on his body, he went out cruising.

"He had to fight them off.

"His next experiment was even more successful. He tried to evoke a dead lover, a suicide, reasoning that the private conversations he held in his head with his friends actually occupied as much time and space in his life as though they were being held with the real person, and therefore achieved an unquestionable reality. However, noting himself confronted by unexpected answers in such conversations, he was forced to conclude that the person he evoked was equally actual.

"Are you with me?" I asked. They were agog, and nodded en masse.

"Very good. Well, then, it was upon this theory of invocation that Rocco decided to try to bring his lover back from the dead.

"'Abel?' he said. 'Abel? Are you there?'

"'Don't be a fool. Of course I am.' The answer was instantaneous. Abel's manifestation, smiling, confident, wearing his old clothes, followed a second later. He remained some paces in front of Rocco, who was sitting. Abel was neither sitting nor standing, but coloring space.

"'Abel?' Rocco said, incredulous at his instant success.

"'You're pretending not to know me?' said Abel. 'Don't bother to doubt, this is as real as anything!'

"'But,' stumbled Rocco, 'you look the same! Doesn't time pass for you too?'

"'Time passes for you, my dear,' smiled Abel. 'That's why I had to come up to now for you. Do you want to talk about the present?'

"'Yes,' said Rocco. He was fascinated and a bit scared.

"'Okay,' said Abel. 'But just one thing. I can't hang around in the shades. You keep doubting me and it's damned uncomfortable. I don't know whether I'm coming or going!'

"'All I have to do is keep you in focus, and you'll be comfortable?'

"'Right. Just don't let doubts creep into your mind.'

"Rocco sat back, dazed by his success. And consequently Abel disappeared. Like flexing a muscle, Rocco concentrated him back.

"'I'm sorry,' he apologized. 'It's hard the first time.'

"Abel looked at him doubtfully, and Rocco was filled with fear that he might, after all these years, let his lover down: he might behave in a way that would make him seem unworthy to have been loved.

"'Do you love me?' he asked, more afraid of the question than of its answer.

"Abel laughed. 'Ask me another,' he said.

"Rocco felt relief. It was such a typical Abel an-

swer, an evasion into mystery, he began to lose his self-consciousness.

"How much do you know about me?" he asked.

"Do you mean what's happened to you?" asked Abel. "Or what you're really like?"

"Both," said Rocco.

"I know what's happened to you," said Abel. "But there's no knowing what you're really like, because you're not static."

"But you are," Rocco noted.

"Abel laughed, rather sadly. "Yes," he said. "Suicides stop changing."

"Are you alive in any way?" asked Rocco. "Do you have an existence from which I just summoned you?"

"No," said Abel. "I exist only when summoned. I get half-chances, glimpses and odd moments now and then when someone remembers me, but this is the most fulfilling appearance I've made so far. Thank you very much." He smiled.

"You don't mind, then?" asked Rocco.

"No," said Abel.

"Are you glad?" Rocco wanted to know.

"Am I glad?" Abel pondered. He shrugged. "I don't know yet."

"Rocco felt a pang. "You're not glad to see me?" he asked, and was immediately sorry.

"Oh yes," replied Abel easily. "I'm glad to see you. I like you."

"Rocco said, "You can say you like me, but you won't say whether you love me?"

"Do you love me?" asked Abel. "You used to deny it."

"What kind of a lover was I?" wondered Rocco.

"Abel laughed.

"There was a silence. They gazed at each other, Rocco serious, Abel smiling calmly.

"Don't you have anything to tell me?" asked Rocco eventually.

"No. What would you like to know?" said Abel.

"I mean," said Rocco, "nothing about life after death?"

"Abel looked troubled, and Rocco felt that somehow he'd been clumsy.

"Please," he said quickly, "don't try to answer if it hurts."

"It's not that it hurts," Abel replied slowly. "It's just that it's your head. I can't change that."

"The words sank into Rocco's understanding slowly and began to pound with all the thunder of a tremendous revelation. Abel vanished, annihilated in the blast, and Rocco didn't even care.

"Oh my God, what have I done!" he groaned, hugging himself and rocking in his chair. The disappearance of Magick seemed to leave a hole in his sanity, which filled up quickly with despair. Tears began to spill from his appalled eyes."

My audience was superbly silent. Harry the hippie was looking at me with his mouth open.

Then Miss B. led the applause. "Bravo, bravo!" she cried. "My dear, you should be on the stage. Such a monologist! So talented!"

The others agreed. It was my night.

Miss B.'s friends chose to leave at midnight, which made me wonder. I took the initiative and kissed her goodnight myself.

"This day's done me in, sweets," I told her. "See you tomorrow."

She smiled, willing to let me go. Why not? I was only going down the hall.

In my room, I opened one of the casement windows overlooking the street. It showed a sheer wall beneath

me that offered no hope of an escape route in an emergency. Locking my door, I stripped and got into bed.

Who was Harry the hippie? Was he Rocco's Harry? Unless Miss B. had learned that I made up that name, why would she use it for this curly kid? All evening the boy had kept giving me winks and nods, raising his eyebrows, rolling his eyes, touching my hand, smiling, acting generally as though he had something to communicate that words couldn't carry.

The alarming thing was, not only did he look like the kid I'd cut bald downtown, but he also looked just like the kid Peter had murdered at Sloane House. Creepy, to say the least.

My thoughts were interrupted by a gentle knock on the door, which I decided to ignore. A minute or so later, I heard a curious tapping, like a coin on glass. I glanced incredulously at the window, but, of course, it wasn't coming from there. I looked around the room. It seemed to be coming from a mirror in a narrow band of gold, hanging over a chest of drawers.

I got out of bed and approached it slowly, staring at my nude reflection. The tapping grew faster and harder as I drew near. Convinced that it came from a human agency, I used my hand as a fig leaf.

"Who's there?" I whispered, putting my face up close to its reflection. I was really looking rather good, I noticed.

The tapping stopped. I glanced around the room. There was a dressing table with lipsticks near the window. I took one called Dull Thud and wrote a message backwards on the mirror, asking the tapper if he had a message for me: tap once for yes and twice for no.

There was a single consequent tap.

The lipstick wore down quickly. By the time it was

at its butt, I had learned that the tapper wanted me to open my door so he could come in and talk to me about something important.

Intrigued, I wrote "YAKO" and went over to open the door.

Within a few seconds, Harry the hippie slipped inside.

"Jesus," he said, wiping his brow, "are you dumb!"

"At least I can write," I told him. "What do you want?"

"Put some clothes on, will you?" he said plaintively.

I shook my head, smiling.

He raised his eyes to heaven, muttered something and sank into an armchair.

"What do you want?" I repeated sharply, nettled that he, the intruder, should question my nudity.

"You don't recognize me, do you?" he said, and smiled.

"You're not hard to recognize," I told him. "You're Harry."

"Guess who I am under this wig." He grinned.

I stared at him. God knows he could have been anyone.

"You still don't know me? What's the matter with you?"

I was beginning to resent his attitude. I crossed to my clothes and pulled my trousers on.

"Now, then," I said, "what's this all about?"

"I'm Peter!" he cried, jumping up. "Peter!"

I stepped backward involuntarily. It was Peter! Had he come to do me in?

"Then . . . why did you say you were Harry?"

"It was a signal to you. God, I thought you'd get it! Listen, baby, you're in mortal danger! Do you know why Miss B. has brought you here?"

I smiled slightly. "I think so."

"She wants your ass!"

"That's what I thought. But don't worry, that's not mortal."

"It may not kill," he said grimly, "but personally I'd rather be dead than blind!"

"Peter!" I said sharply, "I don't see out of my anus!"

He stared at me, then shook his head wearily.

"Oh, Shelley!"

"Oh, Peter," I jibed.

"What am I going to do with you?"

On the chance that he wasn't being rhetorical, I told him, "Nothing."

"Unless," I added, "you quit bugging me." I gave him a sly grin.

He sat on the bed. "Look," he said firmly. "I'm not kidding. Miss B. is going blind and . . ."

I was a little insulted. "She may be going blind," I interrupted gently, "but her taste is still good. You're not jealous, by any chance, are you?"

He looked at me incredulously and shook his head.

"You're mad," he said flatly. "I should have known better than to try to get through in the beginning."

"We communicated better through lipstick, that's for sure."

"Do you *know* what Miss B. is going to *do* with you?"

"No, I don't. Just as Rocco didn't know what Harry was going to do with him," I added, for a dig.

He didn't blink. "She's taking you to her palace in Tangiers!"

"Tangiers!" It was a shock—a distinctly pleasant one.

"The operation is all arranged. I only found out by accident." Bitterly. "I thought she wanted your box,

that's the only reason I was helping her, honest. But, Jesus, when I discovered what she was really after, I had to warn you, Shelley. Shelley?"

I smiled at him, mentally winging over the Atlantic in a private jet.

"Well?" he said.

"Tangiers!"

He groaned. "Shelley, you've got to get out of here!" He emphasized each word as though he were speaking to a stupid cat.

I replied in kind. "I have not got to get out of here. I like the idea of Tangiers. I can dump Miss B. and take a Continental tour."

"Led by a little Arab boy, no doubt," he sneered.

I was struck by his tone. "Peter, *are* you jealous?"

He stood up. "I'm either going to have to knock you out," he said, "or send for the police!"

"You touch me and you'll get a boot in your basket!"

There was a knock at the door. We both froze.

"Who's there?" I called.

"Tommy."

"Oh God!" gasped Peter. "I've got to hide. She'll flay me if she finds me here!"

It was a tempting picture, but I took pity on him. "Get into the wardrobe."

I helped him in and closed the door. Then I crossed to the bedroom door and let Thompson Thomas in. He was bizarrely *au naturel*, sans wig and makeup, only his perennial dark glasses making him recognizable. Behind him were two hulking hoods. They pushed past me and grabbed my arms. Thompson Thomas went directly to the wardrobe and locked it.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, alarmed.

"What do you want? Who are these guys?"

Thompson Thomas smiled coldly. "We're taking a

trip," he said. "All of us. Peter, I beg your pardon, *Harry* too!" He tapped on the wardrobe door with a beringed finger. "Get the message, Harry?"

Peter and I woke up in the same crate, a six-by-five-by-four. Light slipped in between cracks in the planks. I awoke first, realizing at once that we were flying by that curious tremble of a flying plane. Peter was lying cozily in my arms. I blew up his nostrils, and he stirred and opened his eyes.

"Shelley?" he murmured, and, smiling, he closed them again.

I shook him.

"This isn't a dream," I said sharply. "This is for real. Wake up! We're aloft!"

He sat up.

We compared memories. The last thing I remembered was being held down by Miss B.'s hoods while Dr. Ravenal pumped a hypo into my arm. Peter's last memory was similar, except that he had managed to scribble a note before he was dragged out of the wardrobe.

"What did it say?"

"'Help! We are going to be holed up in Miss B.'s palace in Tangiers. Rescue us. Peter Noble and Swell Wonderass.'"

I had to smile.

Unfortunately, he still had the note in his pocket.

"This is serious," I said slowly.

He sighed. "Didn't I try to tell you?"

I got up onto my knees and thumped a few times on the lid of the crate. After a minute, the top opened and the tipsy face of Dr. Ravenal appeared.

"Oh, they *are* awake!" he cried, smiling down at us foolishly. "How do you feel, lovelies? Would you like

a nice pick-me-up?" He brandished a jug of martinis over our heads.

Inspired by his words, not the drink, I grabbed his head suddenly and yanked him halfway into the crate. The martinis went flying as he screamed in alarm.

"Grab the other side!" I cried to Peter. He flung himself around Ravenal's middle. Someone outside grabbed the doctor's legs and began tugging him back. Ravenal shrieked, as though he was about to come apart. He lashed out with his feet, kicking his helper away, and tumbled down on top of us.

Quickly, we sat on him, and I pulled the lid of the crate shut. We both hung onto it with all our strength.

"Now we've got something to bargain with," I told Peter. We grinned at each other. "For God's sake sit on his face!" I went on. Ravenal's nose was bleeding, and I don't like to see blood.

Peter changed his position. "He's fainted, I think," he said.

"Or passed out."

"What do we do now?"

I considered. The tables were turning and turning. And their latest twist had revealed that, far from being Miss B.'s accomplice, Peter was as much her victim as me.

"Peter? Will you tell me the honest to God truth about something?"

He looked surprised. "Of course."

"Are you really Harry? I mean, Rocco's Harry?"

He sighed. "Oh, Shell! Of course I am!"

Somehow, I had never expected him to confirm it. I was beginning to like him, too. I swallowed my disappointment.

"You murdered Rocco," I said flatly.

He shook his head.

"Miss B. did, then."

He shook his head.

"Is Rocco still alive, then?" I asked, surprised.
"Tell me."

He was silent for a moment. "Shelley," he said eventually, "I'm afraid that's entirely up to you."

I didn't understand. But he refused to talk any more about Rocco Sabine.

"What are we going to do about him?" He meant the good doctor, who was still out.

I considered. Although he was soft to sit on, there really wasn't room for three of us in the crate.

It was time for Scientology. With confrontation in mind I told Peter, "I'm going out. Ravenal can be my security."

Under my instructions, Peter got off the man's face and we took Ravenal's tie off and looped it loosely back around his neck. I put the ends into Peter's hand.

"Now you are ready to strangle him," I said. "Have you got the guts if necessary?"

"I don't know," he admitted; he had begun to tremble.

I hesitated. An undependable ally is worse than none at all.

"Peter!" I fixed him with the hardest gaze in my repertoire. "This is serious. It's his life or ours! Do you want to end up in a seraglio?"

Clearly, he didn't know what I was talking about.

"Blonds go over very big in Arabia," I explained. "Don't you realize what a bottle of hair dye can do?"

He shook his head as though he was dizzy, and put a hand on my arm.

"Shelley. Shelley. Will you listen? For one minute?"

I had a minute. "Sure."

"Miss B. is not interested in the slave trade!" He spoke with great intensity, clenching his teeth. "There's only one thing she's after and that's vision! Sight! Eyes!"

He wasn't making sense, and I told him so.

"Miss B. is after your ass!" he yelled, smiting himself on the forehead.

I shrugged coolly. "So? She's not exactly the first."

He looked at me as though one of us was insane. "Your ass!"

"My what?" His intensity was unnerving me. And why was he pronouncing "ass" like "eyes"?

"Your ass! E-Y-E-S!" he roared.

I stared at him. And then I got it. A thrill of pure horror ran down my spine.

"My *eyes*!" I shrank back.

He sighed. "Thank God I've gotten through," he muttered. "Yes, your *eyes*, you stupid bastard! She's going blind, she wants your eyes transplanted into her head! That's why we're going to Tangiers! That's why she's been chasing you! It's Old Lamps for New Time!"

I had gone rigid. My eyes! My means of communication! Involuntarily, my hand floated up to them.

Peter kissed me. The touch of his lips shocked me back into control.

"So that's her game," I said grimly. "The stakes are higher than I thought!"

My mind raced. Ass or eyes, the problem was ultimately still the same. And the solution was the same, too.

"I'm going out," I told Peter. "You've got two lives in your hands, Ravenal's and mine. Take your pick!"

Without another word, I pushed open the top of the crate and stood up.

Seated around a card-bestrewn table were Miss B., the fat man she called Daniel and three massive heavies. Miss B. had switched to a brunette wig, as though she also feared ending up in a seraglio. We smiled at each other.

"So now you know which end is up, Shelley," she said, coolly examining her hand and throwing down a card.

"And it isn't my bottom!" I cracked. I hopped out of the crate, adding "You know that Peter's got your Dr. Ravenal on the doorstep of Heaven. Be nice to me or the world will be minus one martini-head."

Miss B. nodded at a heavy, who pulled a revolver from under his arm and pointed it at me.

"Eyes rot in dead men's heads," I told her, contemptuously ignoring him.

She looked at me with interest. "So? Are you ready to be sensible?"

"How important is Dr. Ravenal to you?" I asked.

That made her consider. I figured that Ravenal was probably the doctor who would perform the operation.

"How important is Peter to you?" she tried.

That made me consider. I tried a different tack.

"Why my eyes?"

"Because they're gorgeous, darling!"

"How about Omar Sharif's?"

"They're brown. We used brown-eyed boys for the experiments. But I want blue eyes in my head!"

"Have you thought of Marlene's?"

Miss B. laughed. "Marlene's eyes aren't her own," she informed me. "And a double transplant won't work."

"What about, er—"

She made an impatient gesture. "I've made my choice. Thanks anyway. And as for Ravenal . . ."

She went on, picking up a card. "Gin!" She laid down her hand triumphantly. "That's our game, I think, Daniel. You boys owe us—" she checked a piece of paper—"five dollars and ninety cents. Thank you very much!" Turning back to me, she said, "And as for the medical profession in general, they can be had, you know that. You lose one, you buy another."

I stared at her, then, remembering, dropped my gaze.

"What if I told you I wear contacts?"

She laughed outright. "Don't be silly."

Peter hissed, from inside the crate, "Find out her blood group."

"I'm RH positive," I told Miss B.

"Yes, I know, love. So am I." She smiled.

I shrugged, and pretended to give up. "Okay," I said. "Come on out, Peter. Forget Ravenal. We're stumped. We might just as well be comfortable about it."

Peter stood up, looking at me uncertainly. He climbed out of the crate and took his place by my side. "What are you going to do with me?" he asked Miss B. nervously.

"Pension you off."

"Accept that!" I said quickly. Peter blinked, but remained silent.

"Poor Dr. Ravenal!" I said to Miss B. "What we done did to the medical profession!" I leaned into the crate. "Give me a hand, boy," I called to Peter.

As he leaned in beside me, I whispered, "Let's cool it till we're on the ground."

We dragged Ravenal out of the crate and laid him on the floor. He was still out.

"Wave an olive under his nose," I suggested.

Miss B. laughed. "Oh, you're going to make some Home for the Helpless so happy, Shelley!"
For the first time, I wanted to hit her.

Instead, I paxed for the rest of the journey: fighting would put us all in the drink. Peter and I accepted a cocktail from Ravenal, who recovered his cool so quickly he had to be the surgeon. We sat down on either side of Miss B., who politely stopped playing cards.

I had been wondering what was wrong with her eyes that she needed mine to see with. But I wasn't sure this was the right time to bring it up.

"What time do we bomb Tangiers?" I asked her instead.

"Oh, in about two hours. How do you feel? I do hope you weren't too uncomfortable in that crate. We don't want to bruise the fruit, do we?"

I wondered what she was talking about, but she didn't give me time to ask. She was going into her grandest with Peter. "And you, darling!" She turned to him and laid her encrusted fingers well up his thigh. He didn't flinch. He looked her steadily in the sunglasses and replied in a low voice, "Take your hand off my leg."

Miss B. fluttered and lit a cigarette. "Darling, I thought we were friends!"

"So did I!" cried Peter, his voice rising emotionally.

"But I am your friend, darling! You'll see how much your friend I am, I promise you!"

"You think you can buy my silence?" cried Peter, jumping up and turning an angry red. "You're crazy! As soon as I—"

I threw my martini into his face: the fool was talk-

ing his way into an early grave. He gasped and Miss B. leaped out of her chair agilely. The heavies grabbed us immediately. I was calm, but Peter had to be given a couple of slaps before he agreed to sit back down and behave himself.

I apologized. I said an imp got into me. He got furious again, but he choked his words back and just glared at me. I guessed he was about ready to throw in his lot with Miss B., which was a pity but one sure way of keeping him out of serious trouble.

I ignored him. "Suppose you did manage to pull some kind of eye switch," I suggested to Miss B., "what would be the first thing you would do with your new eyes?"

"Egypt!" she said promptly.

I was surprised.

"It's a seer's country, you see," she explained. "It has that brilliant sun, and those tremendous deserts and those vast monuments and those tiny hieroglyphics. . . . And specks of sand, and nights so clear you can see every star in the heavens!"

I was strangely touched by the simplicity of her dreams and told her, "That's sort of beautiful."

"And then," she went on dreamily, "I want to go into movies!"

"Peter tactlessly choked on his martini. I was taken aback myself. Did she mean to become a star?"

"Like Andy Warhol," she explained.

"You could call yourself Hernia Productions," Peter chortled. I frowned at him, but it turned out you couldn't go too far with Miss B.

"And my first production will star that hollow-eyed wonder, Swell Wonderass!" she cried.

That shut both me and Peter up, for a while.

"Do you have any hash in your palace?" I asked her.

She laughed. "Would you like some now? Nepalese?"¹⁰

"Sure." I was pleased: things had been rough and were going to get rougher. I needed all the fuel I could get.

"Shelley," said Peter sharply. He frowned at me.

"Don't worry," I told him.

Miss B. detached two charms from her bracelet. One telescoped into a tiny silver pipe, the other was a hollow ball which she unscrewed. It was full of hashish. She dug it out expertly with her long little-finger nail, filled the pipe and passed it to me with a smile.

"You're so pleasantly civilized," she murmured, lighting a match for me. "It's so nice to discover."

"Sure," I croaked, through puffs, "it'll make you appreciate my eyes all the more."

"What?"

My lungs were bursting and my head was ringing.

"I don't boil my cabbages twice, Miss B."

It was very good stuff: in two puffs, I had regressed to the slang of my childhood.

I passed the pipe to Miss B., who graciously waved it on to Peter. He regarded me and it coldly.

"Oh, go on," I urged him. "You only live once." I shoved it into his hand.

"Ah, but do you?" murmured Miss B.

¹⁰ Nepalese hashish, which is made by scraping resin, pollen, dew and human sweat from the bodies of nude men who run through the marijuana fields at dawn, is more potent than varieties scraped from leather suits worn by such runners. The added element of human sweat makes all the difference, I think.

"If that."

"Exactly."

I was beginning to respond to Miss B's charm, which was legendary. I had to remind myself sharply that this creature was out to make itself into a monster by adding another man's eyes to its already unnatural condition. Mine.

"Do you have any dirty movies we can watch?" I asked.

At the pipe now, Miss B. shook her head.

"Then I'll tell you a story. Do you want to hear a story?"

"Not about Rocco Sabinel" Peter groaned.

I glanced at him quickly. "Of course, you'd prefer I never mentioned him, wouldn't you?" I said. He grimaced. It occurred to me again that he was acting as though he was jealous of Rocco Sabine. I decided to find out where he was really at.

"Rocco had a reputation for being a great lover," I began. Peter groaned again, and offered his empty glass to Dr. Ravenal.

Miss B. whispered to me, "Why doesn't he like hearing about Rocco Sabine?"

"Don't *you* know?" I whispered back.

She shook her head. Peter's attention had come back to us, so I went on with my story.

"He knew that he had this reputation, of course, and, recognizing it as just, he took no pains to dissimulate. In fact, one might even say that he deliberately presented himself to the world as a love object, much as other men deliberately present themselves as workers.

"But while this erotic self-presentation showed itself mostly in his sexual come-on, Rocco was wise enough to know that love objects require a greater

intake of love than lust, in order to avoid degenerating into mere sex symbols. His problems, then, were never sexual ones, but emotional ones. He suffered more from the absence of Love than from her presence."

"Oh, that's beautiful," said Miss B. "I know exactly what you mean!"

I smiled at her.

"Also, the exquisite extent of one's pleasure, Rocco believed, was necessarily the extent of the pain that always followed, at least in love, haunting the very peak of ecstasy, much as a usurer haunts a rake."

"Oh yes," breathed Miss B. Peter, I noticed, was listening attentively.

"So that Rocco ended up spending at least as much time in hell as in heaven, thereby growing familiar with the geography of both paradises."

"Amen," muttered Peter, with no perceivable malice.

I was encouraged.

"And thus it was that Love herself began to haunt Rocco. For when she found she had a victim willing to give up his life to her, she grew dependent upon him as a means of sustenance. She sought him wherever he went, in one fascinating form or another. Rocco was constantly in the pleasantly uncomfortable position of having to choose between a variety of irresistible people. He was always in Love."

Daniel, speaking for the first time in my memory without tears, said, "Ooo, that's dirty."

"Thank you," I said gravely. "So are you." He took offense. I continued with my tale.

"As time, and lovers, passed, Rocco began to wonder whether, in each affair, he hadn't always been seeking the same man. Who was this man? Would

he really ever meet him? Or was he the perennial Stranger, who could be met briefly, perhaps, but never really known?

"Love's face, Rocco saw sadly, was fixed, whereas the face of Promiscuity danced with the spice of life. If Rocco ever wanted to meet the Stranger, he certainly wouldn't do it in his sweetheart's bedroom. So he jilted Love, and took up with Promiscuity, exchanging the tender bedside huggings for the clumsy dockside gropes.

"For a while, he got a charge out of his new *mode d'amour*. But one day, while he was being manhandled in the back row of a cheap moviehouse, he suddenly thought, Hey! This isn't the Stranger who is touching me! It's No One, if I don't know who it is!

"And he didn't know who it was, he discovered upon a closer look. He jumped up immediately, zipped and went home. And from that day on, he never again let anyone touch him unless they had first been introduced."

I decided to end my tale there, and glanced over at Peter. He was looking down at the floor between his knees.

Daniel said, "I said it was a dirty story!"

I scowled, and said, "Is he all fat, Miss B.?"

"I find your devotion to Rocco very touching," she replied, with a kind smile for Daniel.

"But unmerited?"

She hesitated.

Peter said, smirking suddenly, "Go ahead, *darling!* See what you can do!"

It was the kind of "in" remark that had led me to suspect they were allies before.

Miss B. silently refilled the hash pipe. She passed it first to Peter, and lit it for him.

"Why, look," she cooed, as he began to puff. "Look how beautifully Peter can be quiet!" He choked.

She was a bitch. In spite of my dislike and fear of her, I couldn't help wondering what exactly she did in bed.

Peter was still coughing. I took the pipe from him, not wanting him to spill the hash. Over his head Miss B. smiled at me. I smiled back, thinking, Miss B., you've really got balls. And that I admired in her, even though she was after my eyes.

"How did you like my story about Rocco, Peter?"

He was just getting his breath back. "It wasn't about . . . Rocco," he panted. "It was about . . . Narcissus!"

"Narcissus?" I perked up my ears, always interested in a new view of Rocco.

"Don't echo," he said, "I'm Echo, if anyone is!" He gave a short, bitter laugh.

I asked him to explain.

"Narcissus was a dumb faggot who fell in love with some kid he saw in a swimming pool!" Peter said savagely. "But he wasn't in love with himself! He wasn't that dumb! He didn't know the kid was his own reflection. He thought he was loving a beautiful Stranger!"

I was struck by his parallel, particularly since he had confessed to being Rocco's Harry. If anyone should know what Rocco was really like, it was he.

"And of course you *are* Echo," I added aloud. "Always in the background, rather forlorn, while Rocco goes around falling in love with his own reflections."

"His own reflections," echoed Peter cryptically. He looked at me very sadly.

We got back into the crate and pulled the top down cozily. I wanted to cheer Peter up, and didn't

feel free in the invidious presence of Miss B. and her cohorts. She didn't mind: I guessed she had plots of her own to spawn.

Peter said he was concerned about our immediate future. I told him to stop worrying. If I couldn't figure a way out of this mess, I deserved to lose my eyes. Besides, he had nothing to worry about. Just like his old man, Miss B. was ready to set him up for life—just for the price of his silence.

He protested he'd never remain silent. I told him to forget it, I had no intention of giving up my eyes.

"Let us," I added, "consider the lilies in the field. They toil not, neither do they gripe."

He gave a small smile.

"Or consider the Flower Children," I said, encouraged. "They toil not, neither do they gripe."

Peter sighed. "I do believe that's your philosophy."

"Gripe, don't gripe, is my philosophy."

He grinned suddenly and groped me. Startled, I opened my mouth to protest, and he put a finger to my lips.

"Don't gripe!"

He was actually teasing me.

I removed both his hands from my person.

"Peter," I told him quietly, "we mustn't let sex come between us, must we?"

He put one of his hands back. "Good!"

I removed it.

"Don't you understand?" I told him. "I'm not *available!*"

He stopped smiling, looking hurt.

"I'm just not . . . not a receiver," I tried to explain, helplessly feeling that not only had I stabbed him in the back, but every word I added further twisted the knife.

He tucked his hands under his armpits and looked at his feet.

"Life is too fast to move at the speed of sex," I told him. I had to choose my words carefully: he was very moody. "What do you plan for the future?"

The question surprised him but didn't quite shake him out of the sulks.

"My immediate plan is to become a Clear," I told him; "to free my mind of its barnacles and let it flow in perfect harmony with wherever I am and whatever I am doing."

"But why does that exclude making love?" he demanded.

I had to give it to him straight. "Making love, Peter, is only the way people tolerate not being alone. It relieves their frustrations. It's like the thunderstorm that follows a buildup of heavy clouds. Or the gush of urine after an all-night bus ride."

"All perfectly natural processes," he interrupted. "But what you're trying to do is something unnatural. I think you want to be a machine!"

"No, a man can't be a machine," I said, almost laughing. "That's not what I want. I just want to operate at full steam, all the time, that's all."

He shook his head, as though there was something namelessly wrong with my words.

"Don't be unhappy, please," I said softly. "I like you, honest. It's just that . . . I'm not available!"

He sighed, so deeply my own heart hurt.

Miss B. had a cheery word for me before we landed and Dr. Ravenal knocked us out again. She poked her head cautiously into the crate and said, "Well, Shelley, this might be the last time we will ever see each other. Goodbye, my dear."

"Wait!" I cried. "What are you going to do with me after the operation?"

"After? Oh, I've no idea, darling. I think Daniel has something in mind. He'll take care of you, don't worry."

That's nice, I thought glumly, as she flitted away. Daniel was such a fan of mine, I knew I could look forward to something juicy.

Peter and I surrendered our arms to Ravenal, who did his hypo trick again. Much more of this, I thought hazily as I passed out, and I'll get to like it.

I was having a strange dream, equivalent in its cringe-making horror to that classic about sliding down a banister that turns into a razor blade. In my dream I was sitting on an uncomfortable chair, wriggling about, trying to find a good position. I found one eventually by settling myself exactly over the annoying protuberance. But the comfort was short-lived. The protuberance began to penetrate me, swelling to an enormous, irresistible size. It pushed my bowels into my stomach, my stomach into my chest, my heart into my throat. Gasping for breath, I awoke.

It wasn't a dream. Peter had mounted me in my sleep. I cried out and tried to buck him off, but the crate was so small he had me truly pinned. There was nothing I could do but suffer him through, gritting my teeth.

When the thumping finally stopped, and his dead weight flattened me to the floor, I relaxed. Within seconds, the drug took over again and I passed out.

I woke up feeling surprisingly good. We were in the crate still, in some place so dark hardly any light seeped through the cracks. I woke Peter, sleeping in the corner with a smile on his face. I decided not to

mention what had happened earlier: it would have been too embarrassing. Besides, I thought, maybe it really was a dream.

We tried to figure out where we were. Certainly we were no longer in the plane. Outside the crate it was quite silent, night, cool and breezy. Then, not too far away, we heard a plane taking off. Clearly, we were still at the airport; Miss B. apparently hadn't managed to get us through the customs yet.

"What are we going to do?" Peter asked, his voice quavering slightly.

I thought for a moment. "Give me your socks," I told him. I peeled my own off, and he followed suit. "Do you still have that note you wrote?"

Puzzled, he passed the socks and his note. I made a little pile between us and, locating my matches, I lit it.

"What are you doing?" he cried, alarmed as I knew he would be. He grabbed his shoe to stamp out the flames, and I pushed him away. The socks flared up suddenly and the crate immediately filled with smoke and the ghastly odor of burning, sweaty synthetics.

"You idiot!" screamed Peter. "We'll choke to death!"

He pounded on the sides of the crate, shouting for help. I joined him. No one came. I had hoped that a smoking crate would attract attention, but now I grew afraid that we *would* choke to death. We seemed to have been dumped in some isolated spot and abandoned.

I tried to put out the flames by throwing my shirt over them. It went up in a sheet of flame. We both screamed, slightly singed. I unzipped my fly and pulled out my cock.

"Quick, piss on it!"

I let loose. The smoke turned into billows of acrid steam as Peter followed from the other side of the fire.

Suddenly it was all over. The flames were out, nothing more than a few black embers hissing at us. We slumped down, blackened with soot, dripping and stinking with each other's urine.

"Jesus!" I caught Peter's eye and we burst into laughter. Pure relief, I guess. We laughed till our sides ached and our eyes streamed. When we sobered up, I noticed that Peter's face only needed a little more of a smoked look and he could pass as an Arab in the dark.

"Now we come to the second part of my plan," I told him. "You take some of our special homemade charcoal and you rub it on your skin and presto, you're an Arab!" Peter roared in appreciation, and we set to, helping each other cover every part of our exposed skin. Having burned up my shirt, I had to blacken myself to the waist.

"Shelly, you're brilliant," Peter admitted when we were done. "Now what do we do?" He looked at me expectantly.

Son of a bitch.

It took me a moment to figure something out.

"Now," I announced, "we get out of the crate!"

Getting to my feet, I braced myself along the wall and ceiling. The crate was just the right height to help me achieve a rigid position. I put Peter in the same position at the other end of the crate.

"Now, when I say, 'Push,'" I told him, "push and brace yourself."

He looked puzzled.

"Push!" I said.

We tipped our weight on the top of the crate's wall. It toppled over with a crash; luckily, we didn't

seem to have been on the edge of any drop. Peter picked himself up. I examined a cut on his forehead.

"Try again," I told him. Grimly, he got back into position.

A few more pushes brought us suddenly into moonlight. I realized then that we'd been in a warehouse or a hangar. (Later I learned that a fire at the air terminal had screwed up Miss B.'s plans to get us through the customs.)

We kept toppling the crate. It was exhausting, and we were both getting pretty banged up from the constant jarrings. But we kept at it. Hours seemed to pass; the crate showed no signs of disintegrating.

Then we landed on something soft and sloping.

"Hang on!" I yelled, as the crate began rolling down the slope. There was a great splash. Water seeped in through a crack. We were floating, having fallen into the sea or some other body of water.

"My God!" cried Peter, his eyes glaring white and wide. "We're going to drown!"

"Oh no we're not," I said quickly. "We've only got to stuff up the cracks and we'll float somewhere!"

We stripped hastily, tore our clothes into rags and stuffed them into the cracks below the water line, which was about halfway up the side of the crate. When we were done, and sank back exhaustedly to our corners, I thought we looked pretty funny, Peter's white body with its black arms and face, and me, black to the waist, looking as though I was wearing white tights with the crotch torn out. I realized that I was hungry, thirsty, my throat was raw and dry and my stomach was upset. But of more concern to me was Peter, who had shown no disposition to find anything funny since that final roll into the

water. He was still bleeding from the cut on his forehead, and his shoulder was badly scraped. He wasn't used to such rough living.

"Peter!" I said gently. His head jerked up, ready for an emergency. I pulled a rag from the wall and dabbed at the cut on his forehead. "Keep your pecker up, boyo!"

He stared at me; then, to my dismay, he began to cry. I took him into my arms like a front-line Marine, and let him cry himself out. Strange emotions coursed through me as I held him, making me tremble slightly. I hoped he didn't notice. For the first time in a long while, I felt unsure of myself.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. He sat up, wiping his eyes so that he made strange shapes of the tears and charcoal on his cheeks. I stared at him, fascinated.

"I don't know what got into me," he said.

"I surely know what got into me," I replied, hardly aware of my words. For a moment he looked as though he was going to cry again. "I mean, I understand," I added hastily. "Don't worry about it. It had to happen sooner or later."

He looked surprised. "It did?"

I nodded, a little embarrassed. "Shall I sing you a song?" I suggested, to change the subject. He chuckled, and, nodding, he scrooched back down into my arms.

I sang:

*"Oh woe, oh woe, oh woe—
On every street corner I see myself
Coming and going, in the wrong costume.
I need some new gear, dear.
Frankly, I need a trousseau.
Oh, which way out of the Hall of Mirrors?
Will I need identification?"*

*"Oh woe, oh woe, oh woe . . .
In every shop window I see my parts
Sale-priced, for inept home assembly.
I could do with an alien shot.
I think a moon drug would do.
Oh, which way to the Rainbow's End?
What is the color of gold there?"*

I finished strictly for my own pleasure. Peter had already fallen asleep.

We floated through the night. The motion of the water was gentle and soothing. For a long time I watched the moonlight playing through the cracks onto our bodies. I fell asleep feeling peaceful, and awoke many hours later with the taste of good dreams in my mind.

A sudden bump had awakened me. I lay still, feeling comfortable and happy. Daylight gleamed through various cracks. I realized we had been washed ashore. I could hear the soft lapping of waves on a beach. But there was no sound of civilization.

I shook Peter awake, which was beginning to seem my mission in life. I didn't mind, since he awoke in a fetching way, no muzziness—just a moment of unawareness, then a look of delight and a big smile.

We tried to guess where we were.

"Of course we don't *know* that we were actually in Tangiers when we fell in the water," I pointed out. "We could have flown back to New York and rolled into the bay at Flushing Meadows. In which case, we've probably been washed up on Staten Island."

"Or Fire Island?" We looked at each other, smiling. "Yes, that's perfectly true," he went on, "except that in America you can always hear something,

can't you? I can't hear anything here except—waves."

We listened together. He was right.

"But smell!" he instructed.

We sniffed. The air had that kind of clarity that seems to make spring water taste sweeter.

"But supposing we *had* arrived in Tangiers," I continued, "and it *was* the sea we fell in, and this is a beach we've landed on, then I'd guess that we're somewhere along the coast of North Africa."

"Brilliant."

"Of course, we could have floated over to Gibraltar."

"Gibraltar's a noisy place."

"Or somewhere on the Costa del Sol?"

We thought that over for a while.

"I'm hungry," he said.

"Me too."

"Have you tried getting out?"

"No. Have you?"

He spent five minutes working himself into a fury against the unbudging roof. I didn't comment. Finally he gave up and slouched back down beside me, his perfectly pleasant mood ruined.

"How about shouting for help?" he growled.

I shrugged and yelled, "Help! Hello there! Is anyone there?"

"Help!" yelled Peter. "Help, help!"

No one was there, of course. We gave up, to save our throats, and to take Peter's mind off the disappointment I suggested a game of Botticelli. He was good at that.

We played for hours, until he abruptly didn't want to go on.

"I'm hungry," he complained.

By midday, the crate was stifling. We lay sweat-

ing, hardly able to breathe. I dozed off. Peter woke me when the tide came in: it was taking us out to sea again. We were already afloat.

A second night passed on the water. This time I slept only intermittently, and was awake when dawn came. With the morning tide, we were washed back up on the shore. It was as silent as before.

"How long do you suppose this will go on?" asked Peter.

We discussed the problem. If the tide kept floating us in and out, eventually somebody must spot us. The difficulty was to keep alive until then. Rather to my surprise, Peter was bearing up very well: in fact, he seemed more cheerful and less neurotic than at any other time I had known him.

As the day grew hotter, we were able to get a little moisture through drops of water that condensed on the roof of the crate. It wasn't much, but it was regular. Noon was the hardest time to bear. The heat of the sun beat down mercilessly on the top of the crate, turning it into an oven. We were sweating our strength away.

By nightfall on the second day, I realized we had to take some immediate, positive action to stay alive. After deliberation, I told Peter that we had one sure source of protein available, and we shouldn't let delicacy get in our way.

"What is that?" he asked. I explained, hoping he wouldn't get upset. He didn't.

And so, as the tide carried us back out to sea, we took sustenance from each other. Passion unexpectedly entered into the act, to vie with hunger and making its appeasement more fun. When we were done, Peter thanked me and I, in turn, offered thanks to him.

From our opposing corners we regarded each

other peacefully, silently. I didn't mind his gaze. Our "naked lunch," with its unconcealable pleasure, had mated us so well that honesty had become our ally.

He slept in my arms that night. I sat propped up in a corner of our gently rocking home, regarding its six tiny walls with a new curiosity. Life had reduced itself to a single cell, and everything else seemed a dream. Miss B., Tangiers, New York, even Rocco Sabine took on the untrustworthy shimmer of mirages. Only Peter Noble was real.

The next morning, marooned again on the beach, I warned Peter to expect hallucinations to set in soon. Personally, I was looking forward to them. According to Montaigne, visions from starving tended to be gentle, languorous and charming.

We breakfasted and supped from each other that day, sleeping through the cruel heat of noon. We didn't talk much, and when we did it was only to amuse. Our trip was beginning to resemble an airplane flight, inasmuch as the only real fun came at takeoff and landing, or, for us, when the tide washed us in and out. Each time we were washed in, we had the hope that we might be nearer civilization. Each time we were washed out, there was the hope of being picked up by a boat.

The hallucinations began at sea that night. In the darkness of the crate, Peter's long white outline began to waver, like strands of weed under water. I felt myself being summoned into their embrace. Suddenly it seemed to me that we were under water, with Peter lying on his back on the bottom, waiting for me. I kicked and swam down toward him, but invisible bonds held me back. And then he spoke, and his words sounded like bubbles burbling from his mouth.

"Come!" he said. "Come!"

My bonds burst. One stroke took me across the floor of the crate into his vast, anemone-like embrace.

By morning we were both pretty much out of control. Our talk had become plentiful: in fact, we were babbling. But it was babble of the most amusing and charming kind. I laughed at everything Peter said, and he seemed to find me hilarious. He had begun calling me by strange names, and I tried to fulfill his needs by acting out the roles he called for. For me, as the day wore on, he took on the awesome aspect of humanity itself. He became Man.

Mealtimes were now a sacred rite. I approached his body with a bestial reverence. He was my life source, and the physical pleasure involved in tapping this source had grown until it was almost unbearably ecstatic. Supper that night, which we deliberately, romantically delayed until the moon had come out, was so overpowering that I passed out from sheer pleasure.

Never were two men so needed by each other.

PART 3

I awoke to look up into what were surely the most seductive eyes west of Suez: and they weren't Peter's. They belonged to a young Arab stud, squatting by my side, beaming down at me.

Startled, I sat up, seeing that we were in a small, dark room, its door and window shaped by blazing sunlight. I had been lying on a rush mat on the floor, my nudity skimpily covered by a piece of cotton.

"Where am I?" I croaked, my voice sounding barely extant.

He made a peaceful gesture, and, standing up, he went over to the door and beckoned to one of the purdahed women passing by outside. I looked him over while he talked to her. He was a good-looking boy, about twenty, wearing a white djalabia and a fez like an East Villager. He had fantastic eyes, brown, bloodshot, volcanic.

The woman disappeared and he came back to me.

"*Parlez-vous français?*" I croaked.

"*Oui, je parle.*" Smiling broadly, he squatted back down by my side.

"*Español?*"

"Non, *je suis arabe*," he grinned.

I chuckled rustily, shaking my head. "*Non. Hable español?*"

"Ah! Sí, sí!"

"*Bueno. And bon.*" I spoke both, badly, so I usually mixed them to give myself a greater range. But it took someone who understood both to follow me.

"*Je m'appelle*, er . . ." For a moment, I couldn't think of my name. "Shelley!"

"*Je m'appelle Dris*," he said. We shook hands, at my foolish instigation. He wasn't very good at it.

"Dris?"

"Dris."

"*Dónde está Peter?*"

"Petah?"

"*Mi amigo. El otro hombre.*"

"Ah, sí. Pe'tah?"

"Peter," I told him patiently.

He tried it a couple of times and finally got it. The female came back then with a bottle of wine, a loaf of bread and a can of sardines. She disappeared again, to my relief; *purdah* tends to unnerve me.

Dris took a dagger from his waist. Plunging it into the can, he casually cut it open. I had to smile.

"*Un exhibition de fuerza mucho charmante*," I observed.

He blushed, laughing, and tasted the wine for me. Approving, he passed the bottle. I took a swig that seared my throat. He tore off some bread, doused it in sardine oil, speared a piece of sardine with his dagger and passed both to me at the same time. My hand moved toward the handle of the dagger to accept it, and he growled, very faintly. I took the sardine from its point.

"*Dónde está Peter?*" I prodded.

"*Él viaja.*" Helping himself to my bread and sar-

dines, as though he was hungry, he told me a tale of Peter's departure which, as I probed for details, he seemed to find hilarious. Because of his giggles, I missed many details, but the gist seemed to be that Peter had stolen some kind of animal and had traversed a small plain and two mountains to Tangiers. The men from the village had gone after him, all except this guy, Dris, who was my guard. The way he put it, he'd been asked to "*faire confiance*" with me. At the time I figured that meant guard me, though later events made me wonder if I wasn't short-changing the phrase.

The news about Peter's defection disappointed me terribly. I would never have guessed he'd run out on me that way.

"*Qu'est-ce qu'ils fait con Peter cuando los él arête?*" I asked.

Dris howled. I wished he'd cool it.

"*Tiene hashish?*" I asked. "*Kif? Marjoun?*"

He drew back archly, looking shocked. Then, with a wink, he stood up.

"*Uno momento.*" He slipped outside, moving smoothly, tall and built.

His wink confirmed my suspicion that he was flirting with me, which opened up some very interesting possibilities.

He came back carrying a long-stemmed pipe and a lump of hashish that was whittled, I noticed, to resemble a baby's inch of gristle. He showed it to me proudly, and I examined it, and then put it into my mouth and washed it down with a gulp of wine.

He couldn't believe it. I lay down to see what would happen. One of my first thoughts was that I was becoming cock crazy since my incarceration with Peter. Scientology, however, would take care of that, as it had just revealed it to me.

The Arab was shouting over my head. I looked up at him.

"*Mon Dieu!*" I said. "*Qué pasa?*"

I couldn't understand a word of his reply; he was too excited to talk coherently. Meantime, the hash had gone into a practically empty stomach. I could feel my juices attacking it with all the vigor of an effervescent.

"*Mira,*" I began to reason with him. To my surprise he grabbed me by the shoulders and began shaking me, as though to shake out the hash. I tried to shove him away, but found myself too weak, so I pulled him down on top of me instead, rolling away at the same time so that I could hook a leg around his neck. I dragged his head into my crotch, plucked his knife from his waist and pinpricked his neck with it.

"*Tetez-vous!*" I told him, to quiet his gasps. I wondered if that meant what I thought. "*Fermez votre bouchel*" I added.

He kept gasping. I pressed harder with the knife and loosened my leg slightly.

He gulped and became very quiet, staring up at me, his eyes wide.

"*Maintenant,*" I said. "*Je désire à parler un peu. usted escoute, entienda? buenol Alors, je suis un homme gentile et sensible. Je ne suis pas dangereux.*" I chuckled, guessing that he'd hardly believe that as long as I was holding a knife to his neck. His eyes rolled.

"*C'est vrai,*" I went on. "*Je ne suis pas un homme dangereux. Entonces, il ne faut pas pour vous a ser affreux. Eso . . .*" I couldn't think of the word for "knife" in either French or Spanish, so I jiggled the dagger slightly in his neck to let him know what I was referring to; his eyes rolled wildly. "*Eso es nada mas que un . . .*" I hesitated; how did one say "a means

to an end" in either Spanish or French? I couldn't think. But, staring down at his frightened face, I realized that a picture was worth a thousand words anyway, so I threw the knife across the room (it dug impressively into a wall), unhooked my leg and let him clamber away. He rushed over to the knife and whirled back at me with it in his hand. I smiled. He needed it—I didn't.

"Creo que usted es un hombre gentile et sensible también, n'est-ce pas? Perdone me por el exhibition: il faut que nous poudrons parler come égalités. Comprendo?"

He stared at me. I continued to smile, increasing the affinity.¹¹

He lowered the knife. I relaxed. I wondered if he really spoke as much Spanish and French as he claimed.

"Diga me," I said casually. *"Diga me una cosa o dos en espanol."*

"Una cosa o dos?" he repeated blankly, going into a sudden giggle.

His giggles were getting me down.

"Usted es loco?" I asked him, sarcastic.

"No, soy local!" Quick as a whip, he flicked his right hip at me.

I couldn't get over him: he wasn't like any Arab I'd ever heard of.

"Dónde estamos?" I asked him curiously.

In his weird dialect, he told me a strange story about an oppressor who was eating up the land. He said we were in an underground village, dug out of the earth so that it was invisible unless you happened to fall right into it. It was to protect the village's anonymity that the men had gone after Peter.

¹¹ Affinity, in Scientology, combines with Reality and Communication in order to produce Understanding.

"What?" I said, alarmed. I covered myself again with the piece of cotton and repeated sharply, "*Diga me, qu'est-ce qu'ils fait con Peter cuando los el ar-rête?*" He shrugged, avoiding my eye. I thought his reaction boded ill for Peter, whom I could see in my mind's eye lying dead somewhere in the desert, his balls stuffed in his mouth. And although he'd abandoned me so cavalierly, I still found the picture a depressing one.

I changed the subject deliberately. "*Diga me,*" I said to Dris, "*quién es su opresor?*"

He grimaced, shaking his head, preferring not to talk about that subject. "*No soy uno político,*" he told me. "*Soy una poeta.*"

I noted his frank verbal change of gender; any moment now, I figured, he was going to make a pass. I wondered what I'd do when that happened, being, as I was, completely in his power.

He caught me looking at him. "*Te gusto yo?*" he teased, lifting his eyebrow and giving me a smile like a sunburst.

I was tickled. "*Sí,*" I told him, "*como el sol. Oh, señor,*" I rushed on, suddenly realizing I hadn't been in actual sunlight for days, "*donde esta el sol, por favor? Quiero andar en el sol, con tu permiso?*"

He agreed that we could walk around the village, and dressed me in one of his old robes, which carried his distinct smell. Putting it on was like becoming him, and when I added a burnoose I knew that I looked like him, apart from the color of our eyes. The startled look on his face when he took me in gave me a strange thrill. I was tuning in to the Arab thing, beginning to get an insight into Lawrence's bag.

We walked awkwardly, my arm around him, out into the brilliant day. I was blinded by the emersion

into the sunlight and squeezed my eyes closed. When I ventured to open them again, I was amused to see that all the women and children had disappeared, leaving the entire area to Dris and me.

He wasn't lying about the village's being underground. We were actually walking on the floor of a big, rectangular hole. Houses like the one we had just left were carved into its walls, three or four to a side. Overhead, the blue sky blazed like a fluorescent ceiling.

"*C'est merveilleux!*" I told Dris, amazed that Peter should have ever wanted to give it up for Tangiers.

He was pleased. He led me through a connecting alleyway, really a deep trench, to another square. Here we took the women by surprise, and they fled with squeals into their houses, dragging their kids behind them. Dris suggested that we go back to his place. I was agreeable.

"*Pero dónde está las viejas?*" I asked, as we retraced our steps, noting only young faces peering at us from doors and windows.

"*Non,*" he replied. "*No m'aguste las mujeres.*" He gave me a crooked grin. "*Son feas.*"

He must have thought I'd asked something else.

The hash didn't hit until the middle of the night.

Dris was lying next to me, asleep. I was asleep, too, until a strange uneasiness dragged me awake, and I suddenly found myself staring wide-eyed up at the dark roof.

Smashed.

My stomach seemed to have a life of its own, an unhappy one. Lying quite still, quivering with sensitivity, every atom supercharged, I listened to it. Otherwise the village was dead silent.

Then a shudder rippled from my stomach, as

though a stone had been dropped into my navel, and an agonizing cramp gripped me, making me curl up contortedly on the mat. Brief, it passed, and I got to my feet unsteadily, my skin prickling into goosebumps as it realized the chill of the night. Another cramp gripped me, more fierce than the first. I staggered outside into the square and collapsed face first into the sand.

When the pain receded, I was left drained and very scared. For the first time in my life I'd met a high that seemed potentially bigger than me.

My skin was stinging. I looked at my shoulder. It was burned light tomato. My lips were cracked, and salty, I discovered, rasping my tongue over them. I tried to swallow: my throat was a dry gulch.

I was nude.

I looked around me in surprise, and found that I was trudging down a completely barren beach. The sun was beating down on my head like a gong. The world was Kodak-colored.

I stopped in my tracks. Had I had another black-out? The last thing I remembered was lying on my back in the sand, looking up at the stars.

The Arabian stars!

Then it all came back to me, the underground village, Dris, the hash, everything till I passed out with cramps. How long had I been walking since then? My footsteps disappeared into the horizon, remarkably neat and straight, but giving no clues. My skin told me I'd been out in the sun too long. Unless I found shelter by evening, I could get very sick, even mortally so. I looked around at the perfectly flat, empty horizon with a growing dismay. Nothing. At 360 degrees a quiver of fear shot through me, to be immediately dispelled by a flash memory. Me, at a

beach, frolicking in the surf with friends. Incredible of the rush of pleasure, I looked at the sea, just yards away. Could that really be the same thing?

In that moment I realized I was still high, and cheered right up.

"The seal" I told myself joyously, and trudged down to it.

The wavelets curled deliciously over my toes. I yelped, and ran whooping into deeper water, flinging the ocean around like confetti.

When I was done, I came back up the beach, gasping and champagne happy. Standing there, shaking the water out of my head, I realized that all my problems had condensed into a single question: how could I get out of the sun? And the answer was obvious. I had to go either underground or back into the water.

I chose to go underground, and dropped to my knees in the damp sand. I scooped a shallow trench, climbed in and covered my body, leaving my head exposed. The cool sand was indescribably pleasurable to my superheated body. I buried my head too, leaving just my nostrils exposed to the air, which felt corrosively clear as I breathed it in, and delicately bad as I breathed it out.

I thought about Scientology, and the way my reactive bank¹² had stimulated the flash memory that saved me from panicking. Perhaps I was lucky that I wasn't yet a Clear, since Clears have their reactive banks totally erased. Not for the first time, I sus-

¹² For illustrative purposes, Scientology likens the brain to a computer with a "reactive" and an "analytic" bank. The reactive bank, considered vestigial in today's controlled environment, is stimulated by danger to a spontaneous reaction. The analytic bank, as its name implies, analyzes the danger before it reacts. Scientology tries to transfer information from the reactive to the analytic bank.

pected that it might be a serious flaw to make oneself more civilized than the world.

I became aware of a very queer noise.

I sat up abruptly. Sand fell off me as it must have fallen off Adam.

Zooming down the beach toward me was a helicopter, flying low, setting up a cloud of sand whirling in its wake. I jumped up excitedly. Would they appreciate an Adam?

The vehicle landed some distance down the beach. I ran up to it, feeling absurdly happy, waving and croaking. When I got within ten yards, a Plexiglass panel in its structure slid open, and an oddly familiar face appeared, wearing a scimitar for a smile.

"Why, Shelley!" it cooed. "How *nice*! We were just looking for you!"

Miss B.

I tried to faint and, thank God, I succeeded.

Worry appeared to have driven Peter crazy.

I lay listening to him on cool white sheets in a guarded bedroom of Miss B.'s genuine antique Moroccan palace. Ravenal had just finished examining me, pronouncing me weak but healthy, and advising that my skin be allowed to absorb its overdose of sun before he went ahead with the operation. Miss B. seemed content to wait a few days. Her complacency way deflating.

Sitting on the side of my bed, Peter was excitedly whispering some fantastic tale about Miss B. sending the copter back to follow my footsteps to the underground village and bomb it. Supposedly she was planning to buy the entire coast of North Africa all the way to Israel, in order to make a new, restricted African Riviera.

"Restricted to what?" I asked, my eyes closed.

"Wasps," he said, inexplicably.

I asked him why he'd deserted me.

"Oh, Shell!" He sounded hurt. I peeked at him from one eye. He looked hurt.

"I didn't *desert* you! I was worried. You were unconscious and they didn't have a doctor or anything. I went for help!"

"You were worried about *me*?"

"Certainly," he said, with a slight frown. "After all, I do . . . love you!"

I ignored that. All my life people have been telling me they love me; it doesn't mean much.

"How come you were so strong?" I asked him.

"I'm bigger than you. And I had more fat to live off. Look at me now!" He stood up and peeled off his shirt. His torso was lean, well-proportioned.

"How come you ended up with Miss B. again?" I asked quickly, privately surprised by a hot flash. "How did you escape from those Arabs that went after you? And what kind of an animal did you steal?"

He went into a long, unlikely story about sneaking out of the village at night on a donkey. He had managed to reach the two mountains separating the desert from Tangiers before his pursuers. There, according to him, he plucked a thistle and rammed it under the donkey's tail. The beast shot off in one direction, while Peter walked the other way. His pursuers, he assumed, followed the donkey's tracks. Anyway, he found a road and hitchhiked a ride in an army jeep to an army camp, where they clothed him and turned him over to the police in Tangiers. That night Miss B. arrived and claimed him. And since it wasn't *his* eyes she was after, he added defensively, he'd let her take him home.

I asked him if he'd made up any escape plans for us.

"Sssh!" He looked around quickly, then leaned over and whispered, "Bugs!"

Recalling his earlier "Wasps," I took a moment to catch on.

"Well, have you?" I repeated, in a whisper.

He shook his head. "I couldn't think of anything," he said softly. "There are guards in every corridor, at the bottom of every flight of stairs, outside every window. There's one just outside your door now."

I frowned.

"Can I lay down beside you," he mumbled, "and hold you?"

I nodded, busy with my thoughts. He clambered onto the bed and took me into his arms. I lay there passively, thinking.

"I really love you, Shell," he whispered.

Scientology, at least at the Grade IV level, offered no help that I could see. I mentally ran through my repertoire of responses, finding none that would suit. My only hope seemed to be in Magick, a science in which, fortunately, intuition was as useful as knowledge. I doubted that I could come up with a spell that would destroy Miss B., who had lots going for her, but I figured I could at least aim at one that would get me out of her clutches.

"Do you love me?" Peter murmured.

"Sure."

The basic elements I had to work with were these: I had blue eyes that she wanted because she was going blind. She placed most of her faith in money, but, as I had discovered, she was very superstitious. Simply, then, all I had to do was find a way into her imagination that would erase her desire for my eyes.

I cooled Peter, telling him I had to sleep, and sent him back to his own room. After he had gone, I pondered the afternoon into night, refusing dinner.

When the moon came out, it was full. I sat on my balcony and meditated in its chilly rays. Many hours later, the day and the solution to my problem made a splendid dawning together.

I would evoke Rocco Sabine to help me.¹³

When a skinny colored maid awoke me in the morning with my breakfast, I asked her if I could see Miss B. immediately.

"Heavens!" she said haughtily. "Don't ask me!" She put down the tray and stalked out.

I padded over to the door and poked my head out into the corridor. A massive middle-aged heavy sat there, arms and legs dangling from his belly, which he had placed on the chair like an egg. He went for his gun as soon as he saw me.

I waved it away. "Tell Miss B. to come to my room," I told him, and socked the message home by stepping out in the nude in front of him. He nodded quickly, waved me back into my room and closed the door.

I ate my breakfast.

Miss B. sent the heavy to tell me to come to her room. Her pettiness amused me. Draping myself casually in a bed-sheet, I followed him to where Miss B. was eating breakfast, in a marble-tiled nook lined with flowering plants. An elegant black cat sat on a chair beside her, watching her eat. I glanced into its eyes as Miss B. greeted me. It was rather surprised by the contact, and looked away.

¹³ Only Rocco had filled my mind and commanded my studies for these last months. Yet such preoccupation is necessary for a magician planning an evocation. He must know everything possible about the character, appearance and history of the soul or spirit he hopes to evoke, because it is from his own mind that the spirit will, hopefully, emerge, the mind being Mount Olympus, Hades, heaven, hell, etc.

Miss B. was offering me some coffee. I sat down next to the cat, who shifted to look at me. I smiled at it. Its whiskers quivered slightly.

"How is your sunburn?" Miss B. asked.

"As long as I don't bend over, it's okay."

We smiled at each other. "That's wonderful," she said. "We'll have Ravenal check you over later on. What was it you wanted to see me about?"

"Magick!" I turned my blues full on.

Her hand, halfway to her mouth with a dunked ginger snap, stopped. Part of the biscuit fell into her coffee, which splashed on her pink-with-green-piping p.j.'s.

I laughed politely as she dabbed at herself with a napkin.

"Now look what you've made me do!" she complained.

I caught the cat's eye.

"Now what are you doing?" Miss B. cried, banging the table with a spoon.

I smiled at her slowly. "Just making a familiar," I told her.

She gasped, and went pale. Abruptly she kicked the cat's chair so that it and the animal went flying.

"Not with my cat you don't!" she cried.

I laughed in her face. It was so amusing to watch her dig her own grave. The more emphatic her protests, the more power she was crediting to me.

"Am I right?" I asked.

"In what?"

"The more emphatic your protests, the more power you credit me."

She stared at me, then looked away and picked up her coffee cup. Her hand trembled ever so slightly.

"Just what exactly do you want to do?" she ground out eventually.

"Evoke Rocco Sabine."

"Evoke Rocco Sabine!"

"Tonight—as an after-dinner entertainment for you."

She frowned, thinking hard. I knew what her answer was going to be, and busied myself picking up the chair and enticing the cat out from behind a pot of narcissus.

"You don't really mind if we get better acquainted, do you?" I asked, as the cat mewed and trotted into my arms. I picked her up.

Miss B. shook her head, reluctantly. I continued the drive.

"How about tonight, then?"

She hesitated.

"Tonight, please!"

She was on the brink.

"Tonight!"

She fell. "Oh, all right."

Reaching into a cigarette box on the table she took out a joint and lit it quickly. "The Arabs say a puff of *kif* in the morning is worth a hundred camels in the courtyard," she informed me, trying to smile.

I lit one for myself. "Still counting, are you?" I asked pleasantly.

I spent the day making preparations, escorted by two armed heavies. One was the barrel-bellied American, the other a provocative young Arab I hadn't seen before. Peter I avoided: I didn't want the hassle of having to explain myself. Whenever we ran into him as I traipsed through the truly sumptuous palace, I had my guards remove him. I felt Neronically cruel, watching him being dragged away yelling, but hoped that later he'd understand and forgive.

In the cellars, I found a superb room of low, rough

stone. It had no windows and only one door, which made it very good for concentration purposes. Commandeering half the staff, I had mirrors moved down and hung on three of its walls. Near the fourth I dotted tables and chairs and candelabra, for a sophisticated audience.

Miss B. procured for me a simple white shirt and pants. I specified only that they be new, never worn. It would have been best, of course, if they had been specially made from cloth specially woven from cotton seeds specially sown, and had been tailored by a man I didn't know. But there was no time for such niceties: I had to be ready by eight.

I had made it a condition of attendance that no one eat within two hours of attending. Hunger sharpens the senses, and the more sensitive a man is, the closer he is to genius; and it was a genius that I wished to evoke tonight, a minor comet named Rocco Sabine.

As the day wore on, however, the need for an assistant became unmistakable. Peter was the obvious answer. The next time he appeared, popping out suddenly from behind a blue ceramic jardinière that was overflowing with geraniums, I had my guards hustle him over to a closet. They pushed him inside so that I could speak to him without interruptions.

"Can you hear me?" I said, putting my ear to the door.

"Yes, you fucking son of a bitch!" he screamed, right in my ear. "What the hell . . ."

I slapped the door a few times with my hand, drowning him out. When he finally stopped yelling I told him, "Baby, I need your help!"

"You're telling me!" came back his muffled answer.

"Shut up. Listen. Tonight I have to make Magick. Will you be my assistant?"

"What are you talking about now, you complete and utter nut?"

I told him. I put the ceremony of evocation into its most primitive terms, so that he could grasp it.

"And I need you to get me back out of the cat."

I had to go into the closet and neck with him for a while before he'd agree to help me. My two guards smirked. Afterward, I advised him to go to his room and try to calm down by evening. I had yet to write out my spells, which would take a couple of hours. "Don't forget," I warned him as we separated, "my soul will be in your hands!"

Pale, he nodded jerkily and stumbled off to his room. My guards escorted me to my room and sat outside while I worked on adapting a serviceable Crowley hymn, dredged from memory, to the evening's needs. Later I returned to the cellar briefly to consecrate it, banishing its previous aura by urinating in each corner. I sent Peter his written instructions by maid, and then, everything prepared, I retired to my room to prepare myself.

Eight o'clock.

I am almost entirely out of my mind on the High of Kings, cocaine and hashish. Almost, but not yet quite.

I make my entrance when everyone else is seated, and stand brazenly center stage, looking around. I am unrecognizable in baggy trousers. Miss B. and her friends huddle together around the tables, glimmering glamorously in the candlelight. I notice she is wearing her jewels, a crude attempt to psyche me out.

I check on Peter and the cat. They are sitting in a dark corner, alone, forming a box with their reflections in the mirrors flanking them. Peter is holding the cat on his lap. His script is lying open on the floor at his feet.

I smiled at him. "Go!"

He switched on a radio, full volume. Arabic music blasted out. I heard Miss B. squeal.

"Find something American!" I shouted.

He turned the knob through a brilliant amplified cacophony before he settled on Mahalia Jackson belting out "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." That was perfect. I turned to the audience and invited them to join me and Miss Jackson in a hand-clapping, foot-stamping chorus. They weren't shy, I was pleased to discover, suspecting drink and drugs, and we all ended the song on a sustained note together.

"Great, marvelous, super!" I had to shout above the whistles and claps and cheers to make myself heard. "Now we go into 'Ta Ra Ra Boom De Ay.' Switch the radio off, Peter. Are you ready now, one, two, three, TA RA RA BOOMdeayyy, ta ra ra boomdeayyy, ta ra ra boomdeayyy, ta rah rah boomdeayyy. TA RAR RAR BOOMdeayyy, ta ra rah boomdeayy, tararahhh boomdeayyy, Ta rah rahhhhh BOOM de ayyyyyyyyyyyyeeeee!"

I finished the last note high, alone, amid tumultuous applause. When it was dying, I raised my hand and they fell silent.

"'A Hymn to Rocco, a Hustler,'" I announced. They murmured and stirred expectantly. I closed my eyes and intoned sonorously, "Thrill with the lissome lust of light, O man! My man! Come careering out of the night of Pan! Io Rocco! Io Rocco! Come over the sea, from Sicily and Arcady, roaming as Bac-

chus, with fauns and pards and nymphs and satyrs as guards of thy milk-white ass! Come to me, come over the sea, to me, to me! Come, with Apollo in bridal dress. Come, with Artemis silken-shod. Come, to the soul that startles in eyes of blue to watch thy wantonness weeping through the tangled grove, the gnarled bole of the living tree that is spirit and soul and body and brain! Come over the sea, Io Rocco, Io Pan! Devil or god, to me, to me, my man, my man! Come! With trumpets sounding shrill over the hill! Come! With drums low muttering from the spring! Come with flute, and come with pipe! Am I not ripe?"

I pulled off my shirt and flung it aside. I addressed my bared torso in its mirror reflections.

"I, who wait and writhe and wrestle with air that hath no boughs to nestle my body. Weary of empty clasp, strong as a lion, sharp as an asp, oh come, oh come! I am numb with the lonely lust of devildom!"

I unbuttoned my old-fashioned fly and pulled my cock out.

"Thrust the sword through the galling fetter. All-devourer, All-begetter." Slowly, I began to masturbate the limp length.

"Give me the sign of the Open Eye, and the token erect of thorny thigh, and the word of madness and mystery, Io Rocco, Io Pan! Io Rocco, Io Rocco-Pan, Io Pan-Pan, Io Rocco-Pan!"

Fully tumescent, I dropped my trousers to the floor and stepped out of them naked.

"I am a man."

Applause rained on my head. I floated, still gently masturbating, above it. I was in Peter's hands from now on.

He did his things. He brought me the cat, ready lubricated, its paws bound, its eyes glazed by drugs. As I ceremoniously entered her, I came, and my

mind snapped like a rubber band, flinging itself inside the cat's.

A dark chamber, illumined briefly by the flash of thought by which I registered my arrival.

I smiled. I felt good: the transition had been comfortable. My vacated body was now available for occupancy by Rocco Sabine.

In the cat! I was in the cat!

I chuckled: how hilarious.

Scientology made me ask myself why I was chuckling. Common sense told me I was reacting to the drug Peter had given the cat, a massive dose of tranquilizer.

This cooled my amusement. Was I going to be prey to every physical reaction of the cat? I hoped not: I hadn't banked on that. It boded ill.¹⁴

I noticed that my thoughts had generated a steady glow, illuminating the chamber. I zenned myself out of the problem by looking around. The first thing I saw was the cat's mind, lying nearby, tangled and sleeping. It was unimpressively small, yet, like the cat, beautifully and elegantly sculpted. Whereas my own, from what I could see—and I sighed for a mirror—was massive and rocklike and scarrēd.

Curiously, I looked out through the cat's eyes.

On the other side of the room, before the mirrors, my body was wiping itself down in an unfamiliarly fastidious way, fresh gism gleaming on its thighs and belly. I watched it, puzzled: there was some-

¹⁴ For example, I hadn't considered the cat's gender important in my plans. But now it occurred to me that to be a male consciousness couched in a female's, while yet sworn to protect the female's, was to be in a very tricky spot. The only way I could lessen the danger was to heighten my own femininity, an absurd and impossible task in the circumstances.

thing odd about the way it stood, arrogantly erect, like a Spanish dancer.

Rocco Sabine was in occupation.

With the shock, I wondered too which of his entry and my body's ejaculation had been cause and which effect.

At that, Rocco looked up, and fastened my eyes on those of the cat, through which I was watching him. He smiled and strolled over to Peter.

"Do you mind?" he asked, speaking with a strong foreign accent that took me by surprise.

He picked the cat up in my arms. I was almost frightened by his proximity. I looked up into my eyes, and felt my gaze bounce back like a radar signal. He was giving nothing: Rocco Sabine was hard, hard.

He carried the cat over to a mirror and held her up before her reflection. I looked out of her eyes and recognized myself. Then I glanced up at the reflection of my body's eyes, out of which Rocco was looking, and found that they were looking at me, seeming to cast back my reflection so that I appeared to be looking out of them too.

"Are you in there, Shelley?" Rocco crooned in a low voice, so that only I could hear him.

Dumbly I stared at him. He smiled, very slowly.

"What would you like me to do, lover?" he asked, glancing over to where Miss B. and her friends were breathlessly watching us.

The cat's mind spilled over a little on one side. I jumped, hoping that Peter had given her enough drugs to keep her passive as long as I needed.

"What would you have me do, lover?" Rocco repeated, flicking the cat under the chin rather cruelly. Her mind flipped up in the air like a pancake, and sank back down into its stupor. I

grinned foolishly. I was scared; Rocco was scaring me.

"How would you like to be a girl, Shelley?" Rocco grinned.

Again he shocked me. How did he know I needed an instant shot of femininity? Did he know everything in my mind? Curious, I looked up at him and mewed, twitching the cat's rump slightly on my bare arm. Rocco slowly raised my eyebrows. He smiled, looking quite evil.

"Oh, Peter!" he called.

Peter came running over.

Rocco pointed at the floor before him. "Suck it!" he commanded. I was horrified as Peter obediently sank to his knees and took my cock into his mouth. I squirmed the cat's body violently, growling. Rocco held it more tightly to my chest. I lashed out helplessly with the cat's bound claws, infuriated that Peter was so stupid as to think he was obeying *me*! Then I stopped struggling: it occurred to me that a human mind in a cat's body could use it to do humanlike things. Carefully, quietly, while Rocco blatantly relished Peter's mouth, I began using the cat's claws on each other to get rid of their bandages. How odd, it struck me as I worked, that I had instinctively treated Rocco like an enemy rather than the ally I had hoped to summon!

My body was growing increasingly excited under Peter's ministrations. Miss B. and her friends were watching intently, excitement emanating from them like sound waves. I kept working on the cat's bindings, trying to ignore Peter's bobbing head below. One by one, the bandages dropped to the floor, bouncing off his unheeding shoulders.

Rocco opened my eyes. Pushing Peter away, he held the cat before me like a box and rammed the

full length of my inflamed cock into it. Something burst inside the cat's body. Her drugged mind screamed awake and up, knocking mine sideways with a dizzying blow. Her body scrunched up on my genitals, claws and fangs flailing. Rocco screamed, tearing the cat away. He flung her against the stone wall, breaking her body further. She dropped bloodily to the floor, screeching. Scared that Peter wouldn't be able to get me out before she died—and she was clearly mortally damaged—I screeched along with her. The pain she was suffering was almost unbearable.

"Peter!" I screeched.

But he ignored me. With Miss B. and Ravenal and her heavies, he was standing around my body, which was now lying in the corner of the room hugging its bleeding privates.

It looked exactly like the first time I had seen Rocco, at Miss B.'s party.

"Peter!" I screeched.

Dropping to his knees, he lifted my head in his arms. His tears were dripping onto my face.

"Peter!" I tried to force the cat's body across the floor, but the furry bag of broken flesh and bones refused to respond. She was dying.

Ravenal was trying to persuade the heavies to carry me upstairs. The American was complaining he didn't want to get covered with blood. Miss B. was furious with him.

I tried to screech again, but my energy was waning.

"Peter . . ."

Suddenly the crowd around my body exploded as Rocco Sabine leaped to my feet and burst through. He staggered over to the cat, picked her up and ran head first into a mirror.

The world screamed.

The cat was dropped to the floor and ignored, as Rocco grabbed a shard of glass in my bare hands, and ran over to slash it across Daniel's fat face. The man howled, falling backward, his hands up. Two heavies pounced on Rocco as he attacked my own face with the glass. But by the time they subdued him my eyes were already invisible behind a curtain of blood.

I sighed. The cat, thank God, had succumbed to the drug again and had fallen silent and still. Obviously, Peter had forgotten, if he had ever really believed, that I had transmogrified myself. Ignoring his script, hung up on my bleeding body, he was now helping Ravenal carry it out of the cellar. Such, I thought heavily, is the blindness of love.

I watched Miss B. hurry out after them, dabbing ineffectually with her chiffon scarf at the wounds on Daniel's face. The three heavies trooped out sheepishly after them, closing the door behind them.

The cat and I were left to die in peace. I felt very good suddenly, as the tranquillizer took over again.

I reflected on Rocco's behavior. After a while, I had to smile. After all, he had only done what I had wanted: he had "found a way into Miss B.'s imagination and erased her desire for my eyes."

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